Lights! Camera! Action!

Filmmaker Alyssa Buecker

Written by Sara Wooten
And the Winner Is . . .!

As the lights start to dim, noise from the crowd quickly turns to silence. The 2000 KAN Film Festival begins. One young filmmaker in the crowd is Alyssa Buecker from Kansas. She is 15 years old. Her movie, Carrot Wars, is up for Best Film. Unlike other young filmmakers there, Alyssa knows what to expect. She has won three times before. But tonight is different. This time her film is up for the top prize.

As the night goes on, awards are given for films in each category. Each winner comes up front to give a speech and receive a trophy. Finally, it’s time to announce the festival’s Best Film. Holding her breath, Alyssa’s heart jumps as Carrot Wars is named the Best Film for 2000.

Alyssa Buecker: A Filmmaker

Alyssa’s interest in making movies began when she was 11. During the summer, she took a class to learn how to make films. It was a good way to use her mom’s new camcorder. For a class project, Alyssa had to come up with an idea for a movie. She decided to use her pet guinea pig Hazel. “I was going to do a film about my dog,” she remarks, “but he doesn’t like people very much.” That was not a problem for Hazel. She will do just about anything as long as she has carrots or lettuce to eat.
Alyssa’s first movie star—her pet guinea pig Hazel

Alyssa made a film that was perfect for Hazel. She wrote a simple story about a guinea pig that receives a package in the mail. Hazel opens the package to find a colorful marble. The film follows Hazel as she plays with the marble. Alyssa called her film *Hazel the Guinea Pig’s Package*. It was 2 minutes long.

In Alyssa’s class, she was told about a contest for filmmakers in Missouri and Kansas. It was called the KAN Film Festival. Alyssa entered her movie just for fun. She did not expect to win. This was her first film. Alyssa was surprised when she got a letter stating that she was a finalist. That summer Alyssa’s film took third place in the drama-comedy division.
Building on Success

After the success of her first movie, Alyssa made more films with Hazel. She called her second film *The Christmas Caper*. It is about some lettuce that disappears. In the story, Hazel is a detective. She solves the mystery of the missing lettuce. Hazel worked with nine other guinea pigs in this film. Alyssa’s third movie is called *Guinea Pigs From Mars*. It is about a crew of guinea pigs from outer space. They land on Earth and run into problems. Local guinea pigs help them get back to their home in space. Alyssa used 18 guinea pigs for this film. It was 5 minutes long.
Guinea pigs are easy to work with on the sets.

Alyssa’s guinea pigs are gentle pets and are easy to work with. She’s had many since they were babies, so they are comfortable around people. She has many kinds of guinea pigs to choose from for her movies. Some have short hair, others have straight hair, and a few have long, curly hair. Most are about 10 inches long and weigh about 3 pounds when full-grown. Some are smaller. The guinea pigs make lots of sounds, so the sets are noisy. Sometimes they squeak and other times they make loud squeals. Between movies, the guinea pigs take a break in their large cages.
Taking It From the Top

Alyssa enjoys making her own films. First, she comes up with an idea that works with her guinea pigs. Then, she decides how many scenes there should be. Next, Alyssa makes a storyboard. It looks like a comic strip. This is where she draws her story and adds speech balloons for the dialogue. It helps to make sure her movie flows from scene to scene.

Once her story is ready, Alyssa decides which of her guinea pigs best fits each role. She thinks about their personalities. Some of the guinea pigs are pretty relaxed. They'll stay put when she needs them to. But others are more energetic. They work best in the action scenes. Color can be a problem. After all, guinea pigs come in many colors: white, brown, black, and multicolored.

Alyssa coaxes her actors into action when it's time to film.
Alyssa needs to think about the color of her guinea pigs when she makes a film. She needs to make sure they can be seen in every scene.

After casting, Alyssa builds the sets, backdrops, and props to make her story come to life. Sometimes, the props can be as simple as covering a lampshade with foil to create a spaceship. Other times they are more difficult. One time she needed several tons of sand to make a desert scene. Since guinea pigs are short and chubby, doll clothes don’t work well for costumes. She uses scraps of fabric to sew costumes to fit.

![Guinea Pig in Costume](image)

*Scraps of fabric are used to make costumes.*

When it’s time to shoot the film, Alyssa has to coax her actors into action. Guinea pigs can be hard to direct. Even though they have short legs and small feet, they can run fast. Alyssa uses food to motivate her pets. “Sometimes I can get them to go where I want by waving carrots just out of sight. But mostly I just let them run around the set and film them and then see what I can do with it,” she says.
Putting It All Together

Alyssa likes editing her films. This is when she puts the scenes together to tell her story. She uses a computer software program to edit her films. By using this program, she can shorten scenes. She can also fix mistakes and change the order of the scenes.

Alyssa has family and friends help with the voices for the film’s soundtrack. Each person is given a job to do. They watch the film as they record the dialogue. They must match their words with the guinea pig’s action in the movie. To complete the film, Alyssa adds background music and sound effects to add a sense of drama. She plays music herself on a keyboard or finds what she needs in a music library. It can take her up to 6 months to finish a film that is 3 minutes long.

Alyssa’s Latest Blockbuster

In 1999, judges from a national film festival sent Alyssa’s three films to the staff at HBO. They liked her work and thought their audience would, too. Since then, her films have been seen several times on the HBO Family Channel’s “30 by 30: Kid Flicks.”

HBO also asked Alyssa to make a new film. She thought about lots of ideas. She came up with a story called Carrot Wars. It’s a guinea-pig version of the well-known Star Wars series. In the movie, a guinea pig plays the star role of Princess Lettuce. The evil Dark Vapor captures her. But Duke StraWalker rescues her with the help of his friends Hand So-So, Hokey One Spumoni, and R4D4. Carrot Wars is 16 minutes long and has been shown several times on the HBO Family Channel.
Filmmaking: Step-by-Step

1. Think of a Great Idea

2. Create Storyboards

3. Cast the Characters

4. Build Sets, Backdrops, Costumes, and Props

5. Shoot the Film

6. Edit

7. Record Voiceovers and Music
A Bright Future

Alyssa is making a splash with her films. As to her future, Alyssa is uncertain. “I want to continue in the film business, but I’m not sure yet about film school,” she says. But she has advice for anyone who might want to make movies: “Never give up, even when things go wrong.” Good advice from someone who made a bright future by filming a furry star named Hazel.

Alyssa accepts an award from “30 by 30: Kid Flicks.”