

Lights! Camera! Shih Tzu!

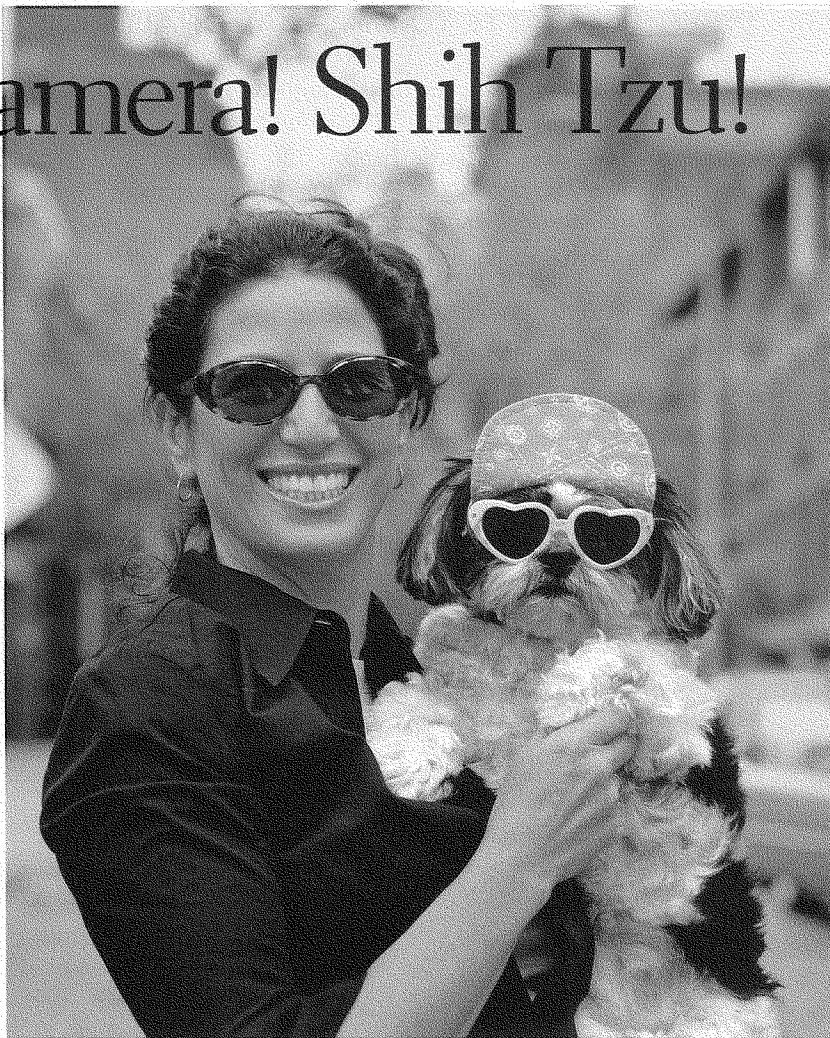
No bit parts for this pooch. Stage mom and filmmaker Gayle L. Kirschenbaum is determined to make her “dog-ter” Chelsea a big, big star

One thing that Gayle L. Kirschenbaum never in her wildest dreams imagined becoming was one of *those people*.

“You know, the kind who, when you meet, immediately show you pictures of their dog? And you look and you go, ‘Uh huh, oh, very cute, oh yeah, he’s adorable,’ while you quietly wonder how to change the subject. *Those people*. I never expected to become one of *them*,” she says with a laugh. “And now, look at me!”

Kirschenbaum, who is single and lives in New York City, has just completed a film, *A Dog’s Life: A Dogumentary*, about Chelsea, her 13-pound black-and-white shih tzu, whom she refers to as her dog-ter. The ultimate stage mother, Kirschenbaum is out to make Chelsea a superstar, and she is leaving nothing to chance. She is submitting the film to the 2004 Sundance Film Festival, where she hopes it will attract enough attention to land Chelsea her own TV series.

“Some people may think I’m over the top with this,” she admits, “but they haven’t met Chelsea. She’s a really special dog!” And would you



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like to see a picture? Oh, don’t get her started. Kirschenbaum also runs a Web site, www.dogumentary.com, where she sells Chelsea wall calendars, mugs and T-shirts.

Kirschenbaum met Chelsea in 1995, when she was living a glamorous and dogless life in Los Angeles as an Emmy Award-winning documentary filmmaker. A native New Yorker, she felt lonely and out of place. She longed for a family of her own, and sometimes wondered

if getting a dog might be a good first step. She’d always considered herself a dog person; the happiest day of her life was the one in fourth grade when her parents surprised her with a miniature poodle. But her lifestyle was hardly conducive to canines. Her work kept her on the road constantly, and meetings and projects kept her out late many nights. Owning a dog, she thought, was just something that would have to wait.

One day she went to visit her brother, who was living in Florida. He had a very full house—a new wife and baby, an iguana, two Akitas and two shih tzus including

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BY JEANNE MARIE LASKAS

Chelsea, who was just past puppy-hood. (Kirschenbaum, who will only say she is fortysomething, also refuses to disclose Chelsea's age. "There's so much age discrimination in Hollywood," she jokes. "Especially for females.") "This little dog just had such an incredibly sweet soul," she recalls. "I don't know how to explain it, but she just stared into my eyes, and I stared back. We made this amazing eye contact."

It was love at first sight. Kirschenbaum looked around at her brother's

who didn't appreciate canine company.

Chelsea, with her gentle spirit, never seemed to judge any of them harshly. She became Kirschenbaum's constant companion, filling an empty spot in her heart. The bond grew deeper and Kirschenbaum believed, as so many new dog owners believe, that this was the most special dog in the universe. She wrote a book about Chelsea, but couldn't find a publisher. She tried to get Chelsea cast in several feature films, and was astonished to find there were no takers.

wanted to celebrate it with humor and plenty of good cheer.


Her filming, however, took a serious turn after September 11, 2001, when the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers at the World Trade Center occurred. Within a month, she had Chelsea certified as a therapy dog, and the two volunteered to visit with the families of the victims and with exhausted emergency workers. That led Kirschenbaum to start thinking of other ways she could share

Chelsea, and eventually the two began doing volunteer work at hospitals and at hospices, where together they comforted people during their final, dying days. With many of these events captured on film, *A Dog's Life: A Dogumentary* moves from a sweet and funny film to a poignant and touching journey.

"Can you believe one dog brought all this to my life?" says Kirschenbaum, who has

become even more than just one of *those people*. "I'm now a crusader. I've used up my life savings to tell the world about Chelsea."

But it really isn't just about Chelsea. "What I want my film to do is to promote the unique bond between humans and canines," she says. "I'm trying to get the word out about how important animals are, how we help each other, and how profound the connection between people and dogs can be."

So, anyway, would you like to see some videos of Chelsea? Kirschenbaum has about 80 hours of footage, if you have a month or two. 

Kirschenbaum, who even took her dog out on dates, says "watching the guy's reaction was a good test of character"



full house and thought: *This dog will not enjoy life here.* This special creature needed, and deserved, special attention. Still, she hesitated when he offered to give her the dog. Kirschenbaum flew back to Los Angeles with Chelsea in a Sherpa bag, as determined and nervous as any new mother to give her baby a good and happy life.

Chelsea was small enough, and quiet enough, for Kirschenbaum to take on outings, and soon she was taking her everywhere—shopping, the movies, on dates. "I'd tell the guy, 'We are not alone,'" she recalls, "and then I'd open the bag. It was a good test of character, watching the guy's reaction." There were good sports who enjoyed the fun, and there were old cranks

After she moved back to New York in the fall of 2000, Kirschenbaum began filming Chelsea's life. She couldn't seem to help herself. Kirschenbaum affixed a spy camera to Chelsea's back to capture the world from Chelsea's perspective. She filmed everything, including her own worries that all the attention was turning Chelsea into something of a prima donna. She held auditions for a stand-in when Chelsea refused to work. She filmed Chelsea's love affair with a long-haired shih tzu named Shanti.

She was having the time of her life, finding the Chelsea project a tremendously creative outlet. The little dog with the sweet soul had rescued many hurt and lonely pieces of her own heart, and Kirschenbaum