

CITY

A Shih Tzu and Her Stage Mother Strive for Stardom

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(www.dogamnesty.com).

Ms. Kirschbaum also sought out the advice of Albert Mayzles, the documentary filmmaker and legend of cinema vérité. Mr. Mayzles was intrigued by the concept of capturing the relationship between humans and animals. He has shot several scenes and also appears in the film.

"This whole thing is so experimental," Mr. Mayzles said while on location with Chelsea last month. "The general population is more interested in dogs than almost anything — dogs and horses."

Ms. Kirschbaum — who said she was in her 40's but declined to give Chelsea's age because of age discrimination in Hollywood — began her television career in Los Angeles, where she worked as a documentary filmmaker at PBS. In 1989, she won a regional Emmy for "Document House," a short film about a house designed by artists. She worked on documentaries that were broadcast on several cable stations including the A&E Network and she produced episodes for television programs like "America's Most Wanted."

In 1995, Ms. Kirschbaum met Chelsea, who was living with Ms. Kirschbaum's brother and his family in Orlando, Fla. The family had two Shih Tzus, two Akitas and a new baby. Mr. Kirschbaum decided to take Chelsea home with her.

As Ms. Kirschbaum grew increasingly frustrated with her professional work, she drew inspiration from her relationship with Chelsea. Eventually, she decided it was time to share their story with the world.

First, Ms. Kirschbaum said she and Chelsea wrote a book together, "Chelsea's Rescue: Tales of a Dog-ter and Her Mommy." (It was never

BEST FRIEND, BOKY AND ALL
With robotic pets, the dog run plays an important role — and it's mostly about the owners. Circuits, Page G1.

published.) She tried to get Chelsea placed in feature films. (Movie studios never came calling.)

When the two moved to New York City in the fall of 2000, Ms. Kirschbaum decided she and Chelsea had entered the perfect television set. So she dreamed up a half-hour television series about their life called "Dogs and the City." (Ring any bells?) But what started as a trailer for Chelsea's television series quickly turned into something more.

"I just kept getting more and more footage," Ms. Kirschbaum said, "and really interesting funny things starting happening and I realized this is going to be a film." Because Chelsea was walking the street with a camera crew filming every wag of her tail, scores of people felt obliged to engage the dog in conversation.

One woman even divulged that she felt her dog was her husband reanimated since neither would eat eggs.

Flush with ideas, but not cash, Ms. Kirschbaum found volunteer production help on the Internet. Her 12 assistants range from sound technicians to a grant writer who Ms. Kirschbaum hopes can help her obtain the \$85,000 she needs to hire an editor to finish the film. She is also seeking commercial sponsors and donations from the public. (For \$10,000, Chelsea will appear with a sponsor's product in the documentary. A gift of \$1,000 buys a listing in the film's credits.)

In the early days of shooting, Chelsea and the camera crew attracted so much attention around the city that Ms. Kirschbaum asked one of her friends to create a spy camera so that people could see the world from Chelsea's perspective. The doggy camera, which weighs about three ounces, is attached to Chelsea's back.

"With the dog, something weird always happened," said Allison Meitz, 27, a film student at the New School

who supervised the spy camera. "People would always engage in some weird conversation like 'I think that my dog is, like, my father reincarnated.'"

And then came Sept. 11.

"It's like we found meaning in life," said Ms. Kirschbaum, who, of course, believes Chelsea has the power to soothe and heal. "It wasn't so much that we were going up for the Hollywood contract as much as we have to go help."

Within a month of the attack, Chelsea became a certified therapy dog serving victims' families at Chelsea Piers. Chelsea and Ms. Kirschbaum also volunteer at Cabrini Hospital and at St. Vincent's Manhattan Hospital, where Chelsea even has her own identification badge.

Her role as a therapy dog has become a part of the script.

Last month, a film crew — Mr. Mayzles was the lead cameraman — followed Chelsea and Ms. Kirschbaum at Cabrini.

The patients said they enjoyed visits from Chelsea, but they gave



Chelsea visiting with John Riccobono. He is not sold on her star potential.

mixed reviews about her potential as a Hollywood luminary.

"Really, these film animals, they have to do something," said John Riccobono, 86. "But she doesn't do anything like those movie dogs. Like that, that that's on 'Fraser' — he does something."

Ms. Kirschbaum is not daunted by that kind of talk. She says nay-sayers don't know Chelsea.

But others felt the magic. "She should be a star," said Glyné Eggö, who took a break from visiting her mother to rub Chelsea's back. "She's cooler than [Benji], and he was a star."