



Viewfinders
Digital Video Club members, from left, Brian Lucas, Skip Stevens, camera operator Fred Pfof, Jack Gorham and Scott McLaughlin work on the movie 'Two Left Feet.'

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF GREGORY BONDS

Living for the View

A love of movie-making brings the Viewfinders together

By CATHY FITZPATRICK-PLATT

It's an eclectic group—a retired computer systems engineer, a vocational rehabilitation counselor, a chemical engineer and an Emmy award-winning inventor in the mix—all with something in common: a shared interest in making videos.

And so the Viewfinders Digital Video Club gathers once a month, at the Quinlan Community Center in Cupertino, to talk about videos they've produced, learn about new videotaping equipment, share editing and taping techniques and hear talks from industry experts and

pioneers. And they watch movies, including member-produced videos, award-winners from national and international competitions and, once a year, third-graders' iMovies.

There's creativity here, to be sure, but also a palpable energy. Ages vary—there are a number of 70- and 80-year-olds among them—but no matter the age there's a can-do spirit, a gusto for life, an interest in the new. Members support one another by sharing tips and offering words of encouragement but also ways to improve.

Club president Gordon Peterson

talks about making these connections; he refers to an old British TV series called "Connections," where they showed how, in science and technology, one thing has led to another. Peterson said that, similarly, the amateur video world provides opportunities to connect.

And so they connect as well as create. At a spring meeting, member Ron Rhodes, a 53-year-old Sunnyvale computer systems analyst, presented a movie made from a comic book he and his brother created decades ago, as teens. He said they found inspiration from

shows like *Mission: Impossible* and *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*

With obvious delight, Rhodes showed the 7½-minute S.P.O.D. Adventure (for Special Police on Duty) called *The Trushé Affair*. The warmly received show was full of things boys dream of: a brilliant inventor (Dr. Trushé), a secret weapon, a device that radar can't detect, a car blown up, a secret briefcase, a murder, a booby trap, a theft, cars, planes and finally, the bad guys brought to justice.

"It's a great feeling when you hear that applause after showing

off your little masterpiece," wrote Rhodes in an email.

The Viewfinders Club began in a sort of interconnected way that permeates the club today. In 1983, a group of seniors formed *The Better Part* and began to produce a local TV show filmed at De Anza College's Flint Center. In the mid-1990s, Better Part members Bill Mannion and Shelby Reyes suggested teaching a course on the basics of camcorders in order to raise operating funds.

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They raised the needed \$1,800, but students completing the courses asked, "Where do we go from here?" Not long after in 1997, the Viewfinders Camcorder Club was born.

Although based in Cupertino, the club welcomes members from throughout the area. In fact, the group's connections extend beyond the Bay Area, as British-born member Brian Lucas, a former graphic artist, produces an online monthly newsletter, which is sent to Viewfinders members as well as amateur videographers and clubs worldwide.

In that sense, tips are plentiful. The key to successful movie-making—be it short movies for competition or homemade travelogues—is the storytelling, said Mannion, the club's vice president, citing filmmaker Ken Burns, who has produced a number of popular documentaries.

"He tells the story. That's what we try to teach people making videos ... to tell a story," Mannion said.

Adds Peterson, "We fall in love with what we video." What a videographer wants to do, he said, is cover a topic and tell a story without dragging someone through it. It's about pacing, "taking your heart



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF FRANK SWANSON

Viewfinders Digital Video Club members Irv Webster, left, and Ron Bullock work on a movie titled 'Two Left Feet' back in April 2008.

out of every beautiful shot you took. In the video and film world, you have to be willing to leave some good stuff on the floor."

And it's just this point that brought Viewfinders treasurer Frank Swanson, in a roundabout way, to the club. A retired computer systems engineer, Swanson said he searched for more expertise

following a 1985 trip to Hawaii to celebrate his daughter's high school graduation. He bought a video camera and shot a lot of footage. "I came home [and] said, 'What do I do with this stuff?' I made a movie of it and it was so bad, everyone just hated it." He was introduced to computer video editing at a Las Vegas' Comdex Convention, and



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF CLAUDIA PETERSON

Gordon Peterson, a member of the Viewfinders Digital Video Club, is seen here filming birds out at Lake Cunningham for a documentary that he is working on.

in 1999, Mannion invited him to a Viewfinders meeting.

Poke your head into a Viewfinders meeting and you will hear stories just like Swanson's. Take the club's June meeting, where member-made movies were screened.

Betty Pickett showed a family history video she had made with

her ill husband to celebrate his 80th birthday, featuring family highlights that included their wedding, first car, children, a cruise and time with grandchildren. Jerry Oliver's video told a story of his son-in-law's charismatic mother; he said he wanted to show how her dynamic personality developed. Background music included the lyrics, "There are many crazy things that keep me loving you."

When it comes to making videos, the club works individually as well as together. A group within the club called the Video Production Group produces an annual club video. In the past five years its produced five short movies: *Maybe Today*, *Dearly Departed*, *Two Left Feet*, *The Interrogation* and *Through the Dark Glass*.

"It's very difficult to get a 15-minute movie to hold your interest," said Fred Pfof, the club's Emmy award-winning secretary, who played one of the key roles in *Maybe Today*. But apparently they're up to the challenge, as their annual movies have garnered awards from national and international organizations, including being named among the 10 Best of the West.

Pfof's interest in taping has spanned the years. He has won two Emmys, one in 1957 for developing the first commercially successful video recorder and another in 1966 for developing the instant replay/stop action disc recorder. In 1963, he developed the hard disk data recorder system; Pfof said this system was later bought by IBM and is now used in almost every computer.

And if you're talking about cre-



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF DALE PORTER

Herb Wolff works the sound boom during the filming of the movie 'Two Left Feet' in 2008. It was the third movie filmed by the local Viewfinders Digital Video Club.

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THE NEXT BATCH OF VIEWFINDERS?

By CATHY FITZPATRICK-PLATT

When the third-grade students at Sunnyvale's Nimitz Elementary School started class last fall, their English skills varied, with some kids barely able to write a sentence, according to teacher Susan Woods. But in May, they were each showing the iMovie they'd produced to the Viewfinders Digital Video Club in Cupertino.

How did they make this jump? Woods, a 23-year veteran teacher, said, "As soon as school starts, I start my grammar, dictionary skills, writing." She said before starting work on the movies, she makes sure most students can write a complete sentence, as they need that skill to take notes and do research.

Production of each movie, start to finish, was intensive and included brainstorming, selecting a topic, researching, writing and rewriting.

"Rewriting was hard," student Jonathan Pappas said. "At first, all my facts were out of order."

Once they had written their script, they then transferred it to big poster paper, practiced speaking it and were videotaped using a camcorder and tripod donated by Viewfinders members Fred and JoAnn Pfof.

In order to set the stage for adding YouTube, Google and other images to their backgrounds later, they needed to videotape in front of a green screen, and a lime-green shower screen from Target fit the bill. One small glitch did occur, Woods said, as one boy wore a green shirt on the day of the taping and "all that showed was his head and the apron."

Excitement permeated the third-grade classroom one spring morning as students worked on editing, talking about and showing their movies. There were chuckles as Rafael Gurrola's iMovie on singer Shakira played, with the song "Gypsy" as background, as he narrated, "Her music makes my family feel like they want to dance."

Another clear favorite was on a practical subject, "How to Make a Pizza." When asked if the movies were being made for a particular school subject, one replied, "It's just for fun, mostly."

Movie topics ran the gamut, from biographies of Harry Houdini and Shakira to documentaries on the moon and a newly discovered planet.

Woods said she worked with each student to help them find something they're inspired by.

"It's all about connecting to people," she said. "Every child is a personality. You have to get to know them."

And the movies they developed gave a glimpse of their hearts and minds.

Jenny Kwon, who moved to the U.S. from Korea several years ago, produced a movie on the conflict in Korea and noted in it that the conflict makes her nervous and sad, as it's her hometown and her grandparents still live there.

Others, too, made movies about their hometowns. Neha Chenna and Kinjal Gupta produced an iMovie about Bangalor, India's fifth-largest city, from where both students recently moved.

Seventeen iMovies were created in all, and most of them had their first official screening at the Viewfinders Club meeting in May, when the students had been invited to show and discuss their work. A crowd of 70-plus people, including Viewfinders members, parents and students, watched the 1½- to 3½-minute movies. Following each movie, the 8- and 9-year-old producers came to the front of the room, mike in hand, to take questions and comments.

Pranav Datta shared some realities of being a kid. When asked if he had done his own videotaping of his aunt's wedding in India, he replied that he used his dad's video, as "I also videotaped it, but I was too short to get a video."

Others, in responding to questions and comments, gave a glimpse of who they are growing up to become.

"I like to discover new things about space," said Jonathan Pappas, whose movie was about a newly discovered Earth-like planet called Gliese 581g.

Likewise, Bibis Hernandez is focused on a career in outer space after producing a movie about the moon.

"When I grow up, I want to be an astronaut," Bibis said.



PHOTOGRAPH BY JACQUELINE RAMSEYER

As Pranav Datta, center, looks on, Susan Woods, a third-grade teacher at Nimitz Elementary School, shows a movie on how to make pizza that was filmed using a camcorder donated to the classroom by the Viewfinders Digital Video Club's secretary Fred Pfof. This is the sixth year Woods has had her students make movies that they will later present at a school assembly and at a Viewfinders meeting.

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activity, 77-year-old Milt Kostner has something to say. The former chemical engineer and project director says people in his profession are known for being creative.

"We have a problem; here's how we solve it. We need to make a new product; here's how we can do it," he wrote in an email describing his approach.

The club may look modest in size, but the group is a hub of connections, with influence that has spread to a local elementary school classroom, public access TV stations, the Flying Doctors of Mexico, the Peninsula Stroke Association, the Rebuilding Together charitable building group, local museums and beyond.

Using equipment donated from Viewfinders members, third-grade students from Sunnyvale's Nimitz Elementary School spent the school year creating iMovies, which they presented at a spring Viewfinders meeting. Club members watched attentively, then offered questions and comments.

"I like your background. Are those your family pictures?" Swanson asked Pranav Datta, who created a movie about attending his aunt's wedding in India.

"Your hair wasn't really blowing. That was an interesting effect," one member told Eden Ovadia, who produced a movie on Hollywood.

And Pfof said to Rafael Gurrola, who produced an iMovie on singer Shakira, the "sound is very clear, like you had lapel mikes."

At the following Viewfinders meeting, a table was full of letters from the students thanking the members for snacks, the camcorder and "letting us come to your place." One student added a postscript, "You guys are so cool!"

One recent morning found several Viewfinders members in action. They volunteered in the production of *The Better Part* at Mountain View's KMVT studio taping a 30-minute segment on tracking family genealogy. As club members Mannion, Oliver and Phil Lenihan kept the cameras rolling, 81-year-old host Billie Atwood, daughter of the popcorn legend Orville Redenbacher, interviewed genealogy expert Jim Riley and *Better Part* member Diane Benedetti.

"How can you grow old more gracefully? Being in show biz, I call it," Mannion, 80, said.

For a number of the members, the Viewfinders has allowed them to make connections and experience something they never thought they could.

"You'd never think when you're going through life you'd have an opportunity" to work with such professional equipment, said the 72-year-old Oliver, a former computer hardware engineer.

Club member Skip Stevens has used his videotaping expertise to volunteer with the Flying Doctors of Mexico. He recently videotaped

interviews that will be used to teach youth techniques for managing stress.

And through connections he's made in the amateur video world, Peterson, a former vocational rehabilitation counselor, said he's had a host of opportunities. They've included taping a TV cooking show, working at KTEH's fundraising drive, videotaping the groundbreaking of Sunnyvale's Heritage Park Museum, taping a Peninsula Stroke Association conference and helping produce the *On the Move* public access TV program, which focuses on active people with disabilities.

Peterson recalled a years-back connection; he met a one-legged ex-Green Beret from Vietnam at another video club and was invited to the man's home to see his video editing system. The friend eventually moved to Thailand, and asked Peterson to videotape his Thai wedding. He did, and made stops in Laos and India as well.

It's been a "marvelous experience for me, what video's carried me into," Peterson said.

The Viewfinders Digital Video Club meets monthly from 7:30 to 9:30 p.m. in the Cupertino room of the Quinlan Community Center, 10185 N. Stelling Road. The next meeting takes place Aug. 10 and will discuss making family history videos. For more information, visit www.viewfindersclub.org.