

All in 1000 Feet

STEM Project Gets Wheels, Results

It's hard to believe that a youngster can enhance his/her self image and develop a whole new set of goals in 1,000 feet; but photojournalist/video editor Steve Eisen saw it again and again working on the 1,000 Feet Project.

He first heard about the project a couple of years ago from a New York-based director friend, Chris Gale. Gale called him and asked for his creative assistance on a nonprofit film project.

It was going to be a documentary on how participating in the annual Soapbox Derby was helping youngsters in one of the city's rougher neighborhoods.



Rolling Education – Teachers at PS 57 wanted to make education – especially science, technology, engineering and math – interesting to their students so they launched a year-long project to produce and compete in the annual Soapbox Derby in Akron, OH. Five teams of students designed, engineered, produced and raced their vehicles.

Gale explained that teachers at PS 57, one of the local schools, had started a program for students to design, engineer, build their soapbox cars and compete locally. The top racers would then compete in the annual Soapbox Derby in Akron, OH.

“As a photojournalist for all of the major networks for more than 20 years, I’ve covered the darker side of neighborhoods such as the one the kids were growing up in,” Eisen noted. “And I’ve also covered how competitive sports can make a big difference in their lives.

“After Chris explained what he had seen with his own eyes, I thought I really had to be a part of the project and help get the story out to the world. I just didn’t realize how it would impact me as well,” he added.

Once Gale had convinced Eisen to handle the double duties of the crew's DIT (data wrangler and off-loader) and B camera, he focused on bringing together the rest of the crew.

Key members of the crew included two respected DPs (director of photography) – Steven Smith and Jeffrey Clark, with Barry Rubinow signing on as the 1000 Feet Project editor.

Early this year, the complete 20-person crew finalized the script, shotlist and gathered the cameras, lighting and special equipment for the project.

This Spring, the crew visited the school more than a dozen times to get video background from the teachers, the kids and the various stages of preparing their racers.



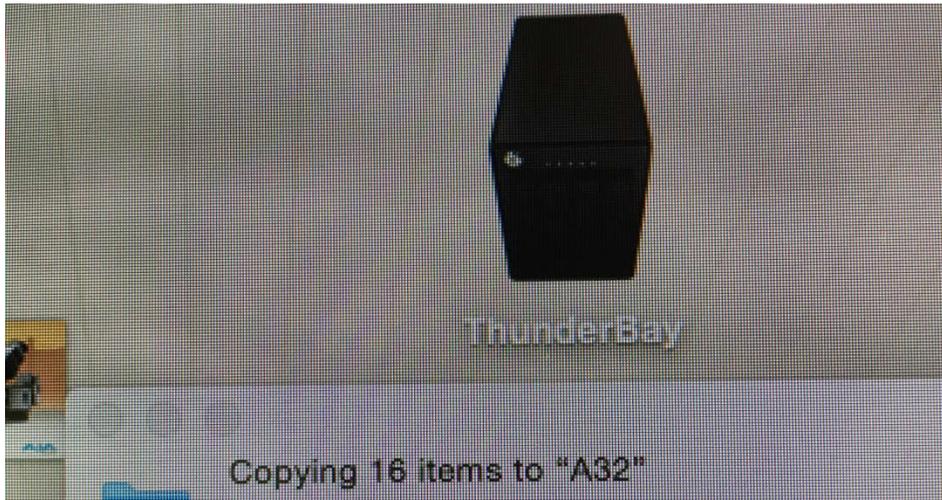
Team Teaching – PS57 teacher Patricia Lockhart came up with a program to make STEM education interesting, fun and important to her Staten Island, NY students with the final goal of being able to compete in the annual Soapbox Derby event.

“We provided a lot of assistance and advice,” said Lockhart, the teacher and the driving force behind the project. “But the project was all theirs and they quickly became very serious about producing the best racers possible.”

What she didn't tell the students was that her goal was to let them learn from each other how important courses like science, technology, engineering and math were in their everyday lives and how they could put that education to practical use.

“I'm not sure who had more fun with the project--the kids or the production crew,” Eisen recalled. “While capturing the expressions on the kids' faces, all of us on the crew wanted to set the cameras and equipment down and give them a hand.

“But we resisted,” he added, “and at the end of each day of shooting, we knew we had great content but were exhausted.”



Nightly Task – *At the end of each day of shooting, Eisen moved the content from the AJA SCION cameras to the OWC 32TB ThunderBay 4 storage system.*

Eisen noted that the main cameras used were two AJA 4K CIONs while he shot with a Lumix GH4, format ProRes 4444 23.98.

He said as DIT (digital imaging tech) on the project, the director emphasized it was Eisen’s task to ensure they saved every bit/byte of the content they were creating at 4GB/min.

Because it was a zero-budget project, we accumulated ten different hard drives full of great video that needed to save and protect.

“I couldn’t take any chances,” Eisen recalled. “I did what any smart data wrangler would do; I moved everything to an OWC 32TB ThunderBay 4 RAID storage solution.

“Done and done,” he added.



Hard Day – The volunteer film crew gave the project gave their all from beginning to end. Here, Bob Bettis takes a quick break at the end of one of the long days of shooting to rejuvenate himself.

Next, he had to turn to the tough, unglamorous job of logistics.

The crew had tons of gear (lenses, tripods, lights, sound equipment, filters, SteadiCam and associated equipment) that had to be taken to the location, packed up and secured every day.

He recalled there were numerous days he would rack up 150 miles on his car just driving people back and forth to the hotel, grocery store and other locations.

According to Eisen, consolidating all of the video was probably the easiest part of his job. “At the end of each shoot, we’d transfer the footage on-site to the ThunderBay 4 to eliminate the need to reshoot lost scenes.”

After a week of timed trials, the crew took a break (during which they edited and posted their first preview video - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEqZGO1c3Q>) and prepared for the national competition in Akron.



On the Road – The film crew and student drivers and their families weren’t above a little advertising on their way to Akron for the nationals to encourage people along the way to donate and assist in paying for the students’ project.

Once again, Eisen loaded up his car with all of the equipment, storage and gear and drove to meet the rest of the crew.

While the competition was all about the kids, the crew was cheering almost as loud as the parents.

I’ve always been attracted to feel-good-from-the-heart productions,” Eisen commented, “and I’ve done a few documentaries with that genre. But this project was really special to me because I was able to help show that underprivileged youth can have the same opportunities as other youngsters if they’re given the right guidance and assistance.”



Ultimate Test – Students put all of the creativity possible into the design and production of their soapbox racers. The local time trials, measured in tenths of a second, determined which were the best machines and drivers to go to Akron

Eisen wouldn't say whether one of the film's PS57 contestants won this year's National Soapbox Derby because he didn't want to spoil the film's ending.

“But I will tell you, each kid looked and acted different at the end of the 1,000 foot run,” he said. “Whether they came in first or second on their run, they were changed. It was a competition but every one of them genuinely congratulated each other. They worked together on the racers. They shared ideas and information. They are looking toward tomorrow and I know it's going to have a lasting, positive impact on their lives.



Behind the Camera – Steve Eisen, a 25-year-veteran photojournalist, filmmaker and video editor, said it was great to see the growth of the youngsters as they learned by doing with their 1000 Feet Project.

“It's the kind of project every photojournalist and filmmaker wants to be a part of,” he concluded.