

A little change can change a lot

Written by By John Nyman, Staff

Wednesday, 11 March 2009

York alumna's latest feature film is funded entirely by pocket change



Photo By Allison Caroline Smith

Screenwriter *Ramona Barckert* is a graduate of York's English program.

Although York graduate Ramona Barckert is an accomplished screenwriter, having worked on such television programs as W's *The Smart Woman Survival Guide*, and most recently

Teletoon's upcoming *The Dating Guy*, she has only been able to realize one of her biggest dreams in the last few months. "Ultimately," she said, in a late afternoon interview at a King Street coffee shop, "my first love was always feature films." Barckert, along with acclaimed short film director Kris Booth, is overseeing the post-production of their first feature film, *At Home By Myself...With You*, a romantic comedy about a girl who resolves to never leave her apartment. What's so special about the production? Unbelievably, Barckert and Booth's ultra-low-budget movie is funded from a base of plain, simple pocket change collected from friends, supporters, total strangers and movie lovers from Toronto and all around the world.

"People really latched on to the idea behind pocket change in a really fun way," Barckert said "I think it's sort of the goodwill behind the project that carried us more than the money."

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—Ramona Barckert, screenwriter

A native of Guelph, Ont., Barckert wanted to be a poet when she was growing up, but it took a year of study at the prestigious Sarah Lawrence College in New York for her to figure out what she really wanted to do with her life. "When I was in New York, I kind of realized I really loved movies and television and I loved to write, so maybe screenwriting was the way

to go." She transferred to York's English literature program, where she cultivated her knowledge of genre and character under professors like Elizabeth Sabiston (one of her favourite teachers), honed her craft and cemented her identity as a screenwriter. "Once I came out of York," she said, "I knew what I was going to do." While at York, Barckert was asked by a group of Ryerson students, including Booth, to write their fourth-year thesis film. The script kicked off both her screenwriting career and her long-standing friendship with Booth. "They were kind of like me in the way that everyone else was doing this sort of introspective, artistic short film and this guy Booth decided to do a First World War epic. That film went on to pretty good acclaim."

Barckert and Booth worked on feature film scripts together for years afterwards but continually ran into problems when they brought their scripts into development. Their new film, however, is a culmination of the persistence and "gettin' it done" attitude that they've maintained throughout their

careers. "At Home By Myself...With You came along because Kris phoned me up one day, and he was like, 'Let's just write a movie, and then we're gonna make it, and if we have no money [or] if we have \$500 it doesn't matter [because] we're gonna make it.'" Pocket Change Film Ltd. (PCF), Booth and Barckert's production company, was the ultimate result, and its mission generated enormous interest. Booth explained that while some people wanted the project to be made because the script was good, others had no idea what the movie was about but loved the concept. With everything from rolls of pennies to \$100 donations (which earns contributors a "funded by" credit in the film's final cut), the team raised a \$12,000 funding base for their project. This opened the door to contributions from producers and other sources of industry funding which led to a \$42,000 final production budget – an extremely small amount for a feature film, even in Canada.

But "pocket change also refers to other things," Barckert pointed out. For example, many people donated their time to the project (including the entire crew, who worked for free) and, despite their low budget, the PCF team was able to recruit some of Canada's best actors for the project (Kristin Booth, Aaron Abrams and Rosemary Dunsmore, among others). And by no means does the film's low budget have a negative impact on its quality. "What it does," said Barckert, "is it forces you to be creative. It forces you into the situation of like, 'Okay, what can we do with what we actually have?' And I think in that way it might actually make you better, it might actually make the film better, because you're choosing things based on improvising and moment-to-moment decisions, and it works." At Home By Myself...With You is slated for completion this summer, and Barckert and the team have big hopes for what it can accomplish. One such goal includes getting into the Toronto International Film Festival. Meanwhile, Pocket Change Film is still fundraising for post-production, which is expected to cost even more than filming itself. Nobody, however, has any plans of giving up. "The really amazing thing is that we've come this far," Barckert reflected. It hasn't been easy, but she and the PCF team have proven that great things can be done with a little bit of spare change.

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