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MOVIE REVIEW

'Chain Camera'

Teens use video cameras to capture the school year at Los Feliz's Marshall High, resulting in a revealing documentary.

By Kevin Thomas
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"Chain Camera's" curious title comes from venturesome documentarian Kirby Dick's experiment in giving 10 students at John Marshall High School in Los Feliz video cameras to film their lives for one week; the students then pass the cameras on to another 10 students, continuing like a chain letter until the end of the school year. Kirby and his associates culled from this footage a 90-minute film in which 16 students are represented.

Kirby placed no restrictions on the students, saying only "Show me your lives," and his project had the support of Principal Tom Abraham and the school's media center faculty director, Harley Haas. Other than a short introductory voice-over describing the school, the film is entirely in the hands of the 16 students and their video cameras.

The students responded enthusiastically to Dick's request, and the result is fresh and revealing in a way that could never have happened had the project originated within the school system. Dick was inspired in his choice of school. With its handsome, traditional-style, original main structure dating from the '20s, Marshall has played the archetypal American high school in countless TV productions and films over the years--from "Grease" to "Buffy the Vampire Slayer." Yet the school is in one of the most economically and ethnically diverse areas of the city, drawing students from communities that include Los Feliz, Silver Lake and East Hollywood, allowing a rich cross-section of teenagers. At the beginning of the project in August 1999, Marshall's 4,192 students represented 41 ethnic groups from 90 countries.

On the whole, "Chain Camera" is encouraging. A number of its 16 young people and their friends may face serious challenges, but their forthrightness suggests they're in touch with their feelings. Several are openly gay, and if not all their classmates are comfortable with them, they don't seem that hostile either. One of the girls, Cinammon, takes her tuxedoed friend Jennifer as her senior prom date, attracting some attention but apparently no undue consternation. There is tension between the two major ethnic groups, Latinos and Armenians, but only one girl can be characterized as racist.

Sex and drugs are of course hot topics, but the Marshall 16 are clearly aware of the pitfalls of both. One couple actually don't feel ready to handle the passion involved in a serious sexual relationship. All of the participants feel free to discuss sex openly: One young man, adjusting to sight after having much of his vision surgically restored, admits he's a virgin. Another student, responding to his mother's long-term alcoholism by sampling a cornucopia of drugs, works out his resentment and bitterness in political activism.

The film notes that even though many Marshall students are the children of poor immigrants, a surprising 85% go on to institutions of higher learning. And it would not be surprising if the brilliant, caustic but loyal Emmanuel is heard from as an adult; the same goes for Victor, from El Salvador, a singer-composer-guitarist of much presence and maturity whose songs are poetic expressions of protest.

In a deft ending note, "Chain Camera" revisits many of the 16 students whose lives are represented at the senior prom and graduation, where one student begins her speech with the usual platitudes but then turns critical of the primary lesson that she feels she and other students have learned at Marshall: "Nothing is fair--get used to it." Even Rosemary, the first student we meet, who can barely wait to try to rake in fast, big bucks as a stripper, surprises herself by making it to graduation. In "Chain Camera," hope takes many forms.

* Unrated. Times guidelines: some blunt language, some of it pertaining to sex and drugs.

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'Chain Camera'

A Cinemax Reel Life production. Executive producer Kirby Dick. Producers Dody Dorn, Eddie Schmidt. Shot by students and presented in a 35mm, digital Beta, high-definition format. Editor Matt Clarke. Music Blake Leyh. Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes.

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