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'Chain Camera': Speaking for Themselves With Tears and Laughter

By LAWRENCE VAN GELDER

High school is definitely not like in the movies," says a blue-gowned and mortarboarded valedictorian toward the end of "Chain Camera."

But as it happens, high school is like the movies if the film happens to be "Chain Camera."

That is because this latest documentary by Kirby Dick ("Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Super Masochist") turns the camerawork of high-school students on themselves for its revelations. Sensitive, insightful, romantic, wounded, angry, yearning, uncertain, fragile and frivolous, these youngsters at a Los Angeles school videotaped themselves in 1999 to render the raw materials for Mr. Dick's mosaic.

Filtered through tears, laughter and affection, the results, visible beginning today at the Screening Room, are touching and fascinating though, by their nature unilluminated by dispassionate analysis. In other words, these particular representatives of John Marshall High School, an institution of 4,192 students of 41 ethnic backgrounds situated two miles east of Hollywood, speak for themselves. And for the most part they are eloquent and uninhibited.

What Mr. Dick did was equip 10 students with cameras to videotape their lives. After a week, they passed the cameras on to 10 others, and so on. The edited film that is "Chain Camera," a title that likens the process to a chain letter, was distilled to focus four- to six-minute segments on 16 students.

Among them are Rosemary, who talks about her absent father, her bulimia, her life as a habitual runaway and her plans to become a stripper; and the hefty wrestling fan Tim, who lives in a bullet-pocked ghetto house, never had a girlfriend and seeks advice on attracting college "chicks" from his beloved mother, who works two jobs and goes to college full time.

There are also the Ethiopian-born Mena, who talks with her friends about race relations; Cinnamon, the warmhearted lesbian who brings the love of her life to the senior prom; the tearful Winfred, deserted by his father, sent from Chicago to live with relatives in Los Angeles and determined to return to the football team after losing a year's eligibility for failing math; the cute Amy and her boyfriend, Victor, who expresses his worldview through his songs and guitar; Ethan, once legally blind and poor at socializing, who becomes a homecoming prince; Silva, angry at the Armenian-born mother who doesn't understand the society Silva is growing up in; the gay Fernando; the politically committed Jesse, resentful of having spent his childhood caring for an alcoholic mother; and the academically gifted Manuel, who sneers at losers and is rejected by the girl he yearns for.

"Chain Camera" may not provide a demographer's perfect cross-section of society, but it does provide

a pungent, provocative slice of Americana.

CHAIN CAMERA

Directed by Kirby Dick; edited by Matt Clark; music by Blake Leyh; produced by Dody Dorn and Eddie Schmidt; released by Cowboy Booking International . At The Screening Room, 54 Varick Street, at Laight Street, TriBeCa. Running time: 90 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Students at John Marshall High School, Los Angeles.

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