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## Chain Camera

(Docu) A Cinemax Reel Life presentation of a Chain Camera production. Produced by Dody Dorn, Eddie Schmidt. Executive producer, Kirby Dick. Executive producer for Cinemax Reel Life, Sheila Nevins. Directed by Kirby Dick.

By [DAVID ROONEY](#)

**Making a considerable shift from the disturbing subject matter of his 1997 feature "Sick: The Life & Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist," documaker Kirby Dick gains intimate access to a diverse group of contempo urban teenagers in "Chain Camera." More a self-portrait than an outsider's view, the project involved Hi-8 video cameras being passed through the student body of a Los Angeles high school, allowing participants to document their own lives without supervision. Engaging result plays like the raw flipside of TV teen tracts such as "Beverly Hills, 90210" and "Dawson's Creek" and, after fest duty, should find its ideal audience on youth webs. Docu was commissioned for Cinemax Reel Life and will debut as part of the series in the fall.**

Key to the casually insightful film's success is the choice of John Marshall High School, located two miles east of Hollywood and populated by more than 4,000 kids from 41 different ethnic backgrounds. This subject pool provides a uniquely broad cross-section of teens whose experiences, views, fears and expectations are being shaped more by the multicultural, sexually aware environment of their peers than by their own families or their specific immigrant origins.

Cameras were provided to an initial group of 10 students, who recorded their daily lives for one week with no set guidelines regarding tone or content. Those students then passed the cameras on, like chain letters, to another 10 kids, with the process continuing in this way over the course of one year.

The resulting 700 hours of tape then were viewed by Dick and editor Matt Clarke, who chose 16 students to profile separately, without intercutting.

Aside from the irritation of every sentence uttered being punctuated several times with the word "like," the distillation of material is quite illuminating, with the kids appearing playful and cocky at times, intense, honest and bravely exposed at others.

Subjects include an Asian girl who feels abandoned by her father and aims to make easy bucks as a stripper; an Ethiopian reflecting on racist attitudes; a drum major whose naive relationship with her sexually prim boyfriend plays like something out of "Clueless"; a prankster who stages a puppet show with his talking penis; a Hispanic musician inspired by Che Guevara and other Latino rebel heroes; and an Armenian girl who ponders the irony of her mother wanting her to date Armenian guys when all her friends are from other backgrounds.

Perhaps most endearing is a shy awkward boy, legally blind as a child, whose sight was restored with therapy. He now writes on bicycle safety for the campus journal and his good-humored nerdiness got him elected homecoming king.

Some of the portraits reveal quite sobering backstories. One kid was sent by his mother to stay with an uncle in L.A. to get him away from the Chicago gangs; he talks about his father's neglect and his disappointment at being forced to drop off the football team when he failed math.

Another girl from a single-parent household became acutely aware of her father's mortality when he survived a heart attack and surgery. And a recovering drug user and political activist talks about the childhood he lost caring for his alcoholic mother.

Attitudes about sex are particularly revealing and considerably more evolved than those of previous teen generations. Kids profiled include an out lesbian, who proudly escorts her girlfriend to the prom; a gay Latino talking openly about sex and facing the realities of AIDS through his HIV-positive friend; a couple jokingly discussing techniques of "oral fellatio"; and a transplanted New York girl who's a confessed sex addict, resentful of the double standard regarding guys' sexual appetites as opposed to those of girls.

Inevitably, this remains a fragmented overview that would work equally well divided up into individual TV segments. But it provides an intriguing, well-assembled snapshot of kids in the year 2000, bringing the portraits to an appealing conclusion by briefly revisiting each subject at the prom, graduation and then in sweet on-camera farewells. Technical quality of visuals and audio is more than adequate. Camera (video-to-35mm), various; editor, Matt Clarke; music, Blake Leyh; supervising producer for Cinemax Reel Life, Nancy Abraham. Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (competing), Jan. 21, 2001. Running time: 89 MIN.

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