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'High' A Yearbook to Treasure

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AMERICAN HIGH.

Tonight, 9 o'clock, FOX.

4 Stars

A comet slamming into Jupiter, space smoke from the beginning of time, slaughters in Rwanda, a hurricane in the Caribbean, rioting in the streets of Seattle, a World Series in Yankee Stadium, the strike of millennial midnight in Paris... We take for granted the power of television to show us just about anything in the universe.

Then along comes, of all things, a TV series that transports us to a secret world pulsing with the joys and fears and triumphs and failures of very real, very complicated people. And this secret world, it turns out, isn't halfway around the world or light years across the universe but just down the street. In high school.

"American High" is the name of this remarkable new Fox series, which comprises 14 tight, quick and absolutely riveting half-hours airing two at a time each Wednesday night at 9 for the next seven weeks. It is, as you may have realized, a documentary.

It's the work of a team of nonfiction film makers led by award-winning director R.J. Cutler ("The War Room," "A Perfect Candidate"). Two of his crews, granted wide-ranging access, spent the 1999-2000 school year gathering material in and around Highland Park High in suburban Chicago.

They wormed their way into classrooms and detention rooms, onto athletic fields and into locker rooms and dance-production rehearsals. And

they were present in homes with students and their parents, documenting invariably complex interactions – sometimes loving and supportive, sometimes exasperating, sometimes angry.

This professionally shot film was supplemented by tapes made by 14 students who got video cameras when the project began and were encouraged to make their own highly personal, sight-and-sound diaries. Thankfully, the kids did not hold back.

Cutler and his team distilled this giant mass of raw material into compelling stories of startling emotional impact and character sketches of surprising depth. If elements of stereotype pop up now and then, it's not because these kids are shallow or their situations mundane; it's because the factual basis for stereotypes can appear as part of fuller portraits of real people dealing with real life.

So we see Robby – a sports star, a solid student and devoted boyfriend of the younger Sarah – whose best friend, Brad, is gay and just beginning to feel comfortable in his own skin. Sarah is a luminescent beauty who is plagued by self-doubt – "I am so not what people think," she says – and fears that Robby will forget her when he goes off to college.

There's Allie, smart as a whip, defiantly letting her grades slip as she struggles to find a livable midpoint between her divorcing parents. And Kaytee, a slyly funny singer/songwriter/guitarist of enormous talent who declares she has no future in music.

Morgan, an erratic spark plug of a kid, desperately tries to

channel a fierce, restless energy. Under treatment for attention deficit disorder, Morgan can be maddening to parents and friends alike, and his self-absorbed behavior may test the audience's tolerance, too. But then, Morgan confesses, "My whole personality is just a front," and he takes a volunteer job teaching gymnastics to retarded kids.

What's going on here is a delicate but insistent probing of contemporary, middle-class American adolescence, a subject that usually gets only lip service – particularly from television.

Cutler and his colleagues chose to treat their subjects and stories with enormous respect.

So the emotional/hormonal swirl of young love, for example, emerges as a true and important force in these kids' lives, not something to be mocked or demeaned. We see adults repeatedly misinterpret kids' declarations of independence as signs of genuine maturity.

Also apparent is the producers' desire to make shows that not only are about teenagers but are also shows that teenagers actually would enjoy watching. So music is all but omnipresent. Editing doesn't dawdle, although it stops well short of the artificial frenzy of music videos and more routine MTV-ish documentaries.

At the heart of "American High," though, is the kids' troubling, sometimes agonizing uncertainty about what kind of people they really are, what they can or should hope to achieve and whether their presence on this earth can possibly make a difference to anybody.