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12 Lives, Steeping in a College Cooker

REVIEW

FRESHMAN DIARIES. Cameras go to the University of Texas alongside 12 new students enjoying the first real freedom of their young lives. Showtime series premieres Sunday at 11 p.m. (with a half-hour sneak preview at 9:25 p.m.).

By Diane Werts

STAFF WRITER

It's that time of year again. And whether you're the one going off to school or the one sending someone off, Showtime's "Freshman Diaries" is a fascinating trip inside that most exciting, most terrifying turning point in life: heading away from home to college. Those of us who've been there will recognize the exhilaration, the instability, the freedom, the pressure, the possibilities, the fears. And the heartbreaking loneliness of living in dorms among hundreds of people, none of whom seems to have the smallest clue about the fundamental value of you.

Documentarian R.J. Cutler showed us the previous stage of adolescent life in the Fox/PBS series "American High" (and also worked his eavesdropping magic in ABC's sadly aborted "Real Roseanne Show"). His crew's cameras aren't just a fly on the wall here at family confabs, classroom yawnfests, drunken parties, romantic connections/clashes, and late-night debates about majors, boyfriends and identity crises. They're also confessional tools in the hands of the 12 University of Texas freshmen whose lives the series chronicles. These kids, when they feel most like kids again, can talk in solitude to their own camcorder lens, as if talking to themselves—whether that's the self they think they're leaving behind, or the self they desperately want to reshape themselves into being.

"Every day, it's becoming more and more apparent



Showtime Photo / Lisa Maizlish

A reality series with class, "Freshman Diaries" debuts on Showtime Sunday.

that I'm gonna have to live for myself," says Casey, a "stuck" girl who'd love to study theater but gets pushed into computer science by a domineering father with whom she endures a tortured relationship. So Casey gets drunk. Nicole also feels boxed in, but by her own sense of responsibility. "I play by the rules," she says. "I feel like I'm missing out on something." So she gets drunk. Neil can't wait to escape his small Texas town to lead the gay life he couldn't there. But then he finds himself attracted to cute gal-pal Hannah. Cocky Kyle hits Austin tight with his high school buds, yet once there, he feels increasingly abandoned. Need we

while also introducing us to new ones. Yet to come are those with stronger hometown ties, like Josh with his pregnant high school girlfriend. We're also promised "a bisexual Goth art chick" and a Guatemalan exchange student.

"Freshman Diaries" manages to maintain that sort of mix throughout, in ethnicity and gender-identity, from timid kids to party hounds, the rarely daring next to the drama queens. That's the great thing about college. You're thrown together with everybody and left to your own devices to sort it all out. The rest of life is unlikely to be so ceaselessly stimulating—or gut-level scary. ■

say drinking enters into all these scenarios?

If college is, as one kid says, "the time where you find yourself," that prospect is so altogether alarming that alcohol seems to be a way to become somebody "not you," somebody less insecure, less uptight, more charming and carefree. It's a paradoxical time, where Casey can say "I'm running out of options" at the moment everything in her life is actually most up for grabs. Everything feels so dramatic, so crucial, so immediate, yet so everlasting. Because every feeling hits an emotional peak, Cutler's cutting reflects that intensity, all tight and in close-up, those dorm-room walls feeling ever more claustrophobic and trapping.

The first two half-hours at least (among 10 episodes) tend to fly by, tracing the latest in the lives of the students we've met,