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An Inside Look At How It Feels To Be a Teenager

By ANDY MEISLER

LOS ANGELES

IN the opening scene of the second episode of "American High," a new half-hour series that has its premiere Wednesday night on Fox, one of the main characters — a "difficult" high school senior named Morgan Moss — careers through his Chicago-area suburban home in search of privacy.

The two-minute sequence is shot entirely from Morgan's point of view. As he passes through the kitchen his mother, off screen, snarls, "Clean your room right now!" Morgan's father comes into view, sitting at the kitchen table, frowning fiercely and lighting a cigarette. The camera, shaking with barely controlled rage, lingers on the gray-bearded man as he reads his son the riot act, calling him a "lousy student" and "an obnoxious kid," among other things. Morgan's younger brother, revealed by a slight rightward pan, flips up a middle finger.

"Come here, dork!" Morgan shouts.

Their mother advances into the frame to break up the fight. Morgan retreats noisily through the living room and up the stairs; the camera covers his retreat in impeccable MTV any-angle-except-right style. The door to his bedroom slams and the camera turns toward Morgan's face for the first time.

He hisses, "Like I said..." and, with perfect timing, uses a mild expletive to describe his parents.

This powerful sequence, tightly packed with information and emotion and just a touch of black humor, would perk up the résumé reel of many a Hollywood writer, director or cinematographer — if it were not executed in its entirety by a teenager named Morgan Moss, who is in fact a "difficult" high school senior recording the details of his real Chicago-area suburban life.

"When we first screened it we were astonished," said R. J. Cutler, an executive producer and the director of "American High," in his office on Wilshire Boulevard recently. "I mean, we were like: 'Oh, my God! God bless you, Morgan! You actually did it!'"

Andy Meisler, a segment producer of the talk show "Exhale With Candice Bergen" on the Oxygen network, writes frequently about television.

Such are the serendipitous, if hard-won, rewards of "nonfiction drama," a form of serial entertainment that, while previously seen in England ("1900 House," "Airport") and on American public television ("An American Family," "The Farmer's Wife") is new to American commercial prime time. "American High" will be joined in late August by "Hopkins 24/7," a six-part series from ABC News about the Johns Hopkins Medical Center that also uses handheld digital cameras.

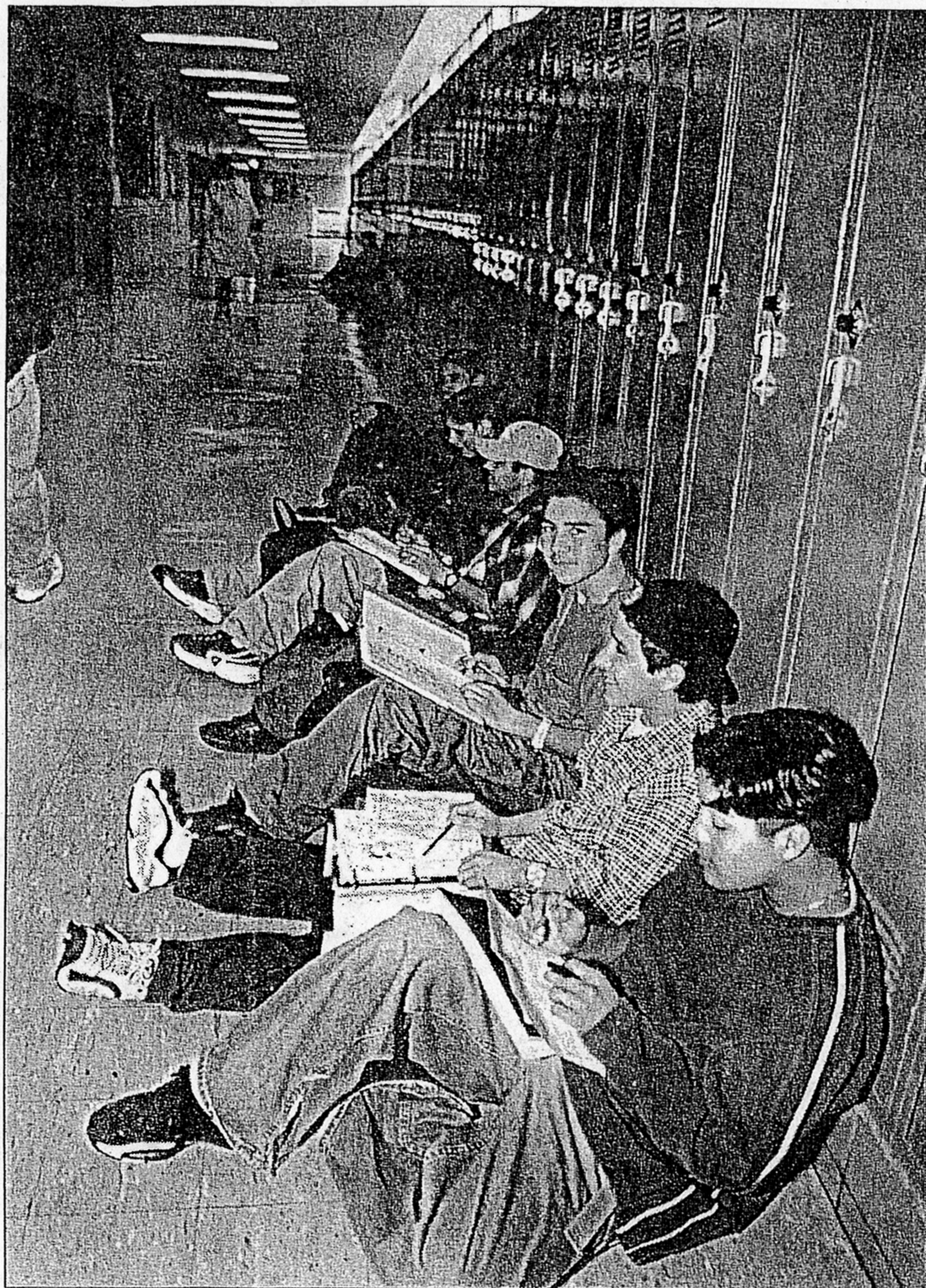
Mr. Cutler, 38, an acclaimed documentary filmmaker ("The War Room" and "A Perfect Candidate") conceived of, developed, set in motion and sold "American High" to

A 'nonfiction drama'
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chaotic lives of 14 more
or less ordinary high
school students.

Fox within a year. Eschewing the highly paid actors and writer-producers and most of the crew members used on such teen dramas as "Party of Five" and "Beverly Hills 90210," he set out to illuminate high school life at about one-third the cost of those series. He did this by marrying cinéma vérité techniques with the interlocking storytelling format familiar to viewers of "E.R." or "N.Y.P.D. Blue."

In 13 half-hour episodes, tautly edited and overlaid with a jangly rock 'n' roll soundtrack, "American High" unspools the stories of 14 students at Highland Park, a public high school some 40 miles northwest of Chicago that appears to be predominantly upper middle class but reasonably diverse.

Mr. Cutler obtained permission to film at Highland Park by, among other things, assigning one of his field producers to teach a for-credit course in documentary filmmaking; donating the project's used digital camcorders and other equipment to the school; promising that no student or faculty member would be filmed involuntarily; and pledging to show rough cuts, for comments



Lisa Maizlish/Fox

Students in the hall of Highland Park High School on "American High."

and objections, well before air time.

More than 100 students volunteered for the project; they were winnowed down after extensive interviews and, in some cases, several days of preliminary filming.

Although Highland Park was carefully selected — it was highlighted in a 1983 book Mr. Cutler had read titled "The Good High School: Portraits of Character and Culture" — and the students had been carefully "cast," none of the dialogue was scripted or the filmed situations prearranged. There is no narration.

The raw material of "American High" was some 2,800 hours of digital footage; about 70 percent of it shot by two fly-on-the-wall documentary crews and the balance provided by camcorder "video diaries" shot by the subjects themselves.

Back in Los Angeles, where the project, amply financed for a documentary, was under terrific time pressure, six "loggers" entered the characters' every conflict, emotion and line of dialogue into a database. Then an eight-person story department sifted through the data, selected a tiny percent-

age of the cross-referenced footage to be worked into coherent story lines and episodes, and sent their suggestions to a team of six editors and Mr. Cutler.

Well aware of Fox's reputation, Mr. Cutler emphasized that "American High" is a product of the network's drama division, not its reality division, which was responsible for such memorable fare as "When Animals Attack" and "Who Wants to Marry a Multi-millionaire?"

"The great Orwellian irony of the phrase reality television is that there's nothing real about it all," Mr. Cutler said. "Whereas we, as documentary filmmakers, know that we are not reproducing reality — we're storytellers, trying to tell the stories we find as truly and entertainingly as possible."

Indeed, none of the hallmarks of manipulation or exploitation are apparent in the first three episodes of "American High": there is no sex, on or off stage, and the only drug in evidence is Ritalin, taken by a principal character who has Attention Deficit Disorder.

What viewers do get is a long look at this group of ordinary, extraordinary kids, including Morgan Moss, a solid D student ("These are the years that you are supposed to go wild," he declares. "Blame it all on your parents or society!") who often argues, sometimes engagingly so, that there is absolutely no contradiction between his continuing causeless rebellion and his ultimate goal of making his mark on the world.

THERE is also Robby Nathan, a sensitive, popular student-athlete with one eye on his future at the University of Colorado and the other on his longtime girlfriend, who loves him so intensely that she can't imagine life after their inevitable separation. Robby's best male friend is Brad Kresman, who is openly and most of the time proudly gay.

Mike (Kiwi) Langford is the football team's star placekicker. He may be so psyched up for his nerve-racking specialty that he can't see that his closest friend and confidant, a dark-haired girl named Anna Santiago, is silently in love with him.

Most gripping, perhaps, is the story of Allie Komessar. Truant for four months after her father announced that he had a longtime mistress who was pregnant and that he was leaving to start a new family, Allie was back in class, trying to graduate while patching together her home life.

Whether young viewers accustomed to teen dramas with higher concepts and clearer skins will take to "American High" is problematic. ("We think it will occupy the space between MTV's 'Real World' and network television," Barry Newman, the head of Fox Television, said hopefully.) But the series has already satisfied its first audience.

"I never felt like a character in a TV series," Kiwi Langford, who will enter Ball State University in the fall, said in a telephone interview. "I still don't. As far as I'm

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concerned, they put our lives on television exactly as we lived them."

Robby Nathan, a few weeks from his first college class in Boulder, said: "I don't think that just because there were film crews around we changed what we did or said. Those guys were our friends. It was just like having a conversation with some good friends nearby listening to us. Sort of like therapy, too."

Brad Kresman, bound for New York University, said: "I feel very satisfied. I got my point across. They benefited from me because I provided my time and allowed them to come into my life. They benefited me by allowing me to speak my mind."

Susan Benjamin, an assistant superintendent of the Highland Park school district and a liaison between the school and the filmmakers, said: "R. J. and his staff did what they said they would do. They told real stories of kids coming of age, without oversimplifying or exaggerating anything." Ms. Benjamin added that no student, teacher or administrator had objected to any of the edited footage — testimony to Mr. Cutler's considerable experience in straddling the line between theatricality and real life.

Mr. Cutler, red-bearded and solidly built, was raised on Long Island and attended Great Neck North High School; at Harvard he studied theater under Robert Brustein and Peter Sellars. "But I was also in love with journalism," he said. During college he worked on an underground newspaper, and in 1982 he took a year off to work as an intern at National Public Radio in Washington.

After graduation, he directed several off-Broadway plays, including "Right Behind the Flag," a 1988 Playrights Horizon production that starred a 27-year-old Kevin Spacey. That year the reporter John Hockenberry, a friend from his N.P.R. days, asked Mr. Cutler to produce "Heat," an



Lisa Maizlish/Fox

Morgan Moss, a senior at Highland Park High School, in "American High."

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eclectic radio program that mixed interviews, essays, live music and spoken-word performance pieces. "Heat" won a Peabody Award but never quite caught on with the public radio audience; it was canceled after a year. (Its quirky television descendent, "Edgewise," a weekly series on MSNBC with Mr. Hockenberry as host and Mr. Cutler as producer, had its premiere in 1996 and lasted only one season.)

In 1992 Mr. Cutler was one of the producers of "The War Room," D. A. Pennebaker's documentary about Bill Clinton's inner circle of campaign strategists, which was nominated for an Academy Award. In 1994 Mr. Cutler was co-director, with David Van Taylor, of "A Perfect Candidate," which

centered on the contentious and rather bizarre Senate race in Virginia between the incumbent, Charles Robb, and his challenger, Oliver North. It was nominated for an Emmy.

Financed as anemically as most documentary projects, "A Perfect Candidate" took two and a half years to complete. In 1999 Mr. Cutler signed with Moore-Medavoy, a Los Angeles-based management company, and began to develop a project to sell to a major network. He quickly decided that high school life would be both fertile and salable.

"Yes, this is familiar territory, but all the stories have a mythic quality to them," he said. "I don't want to overstate this, but I think there is a common theme between 'The War Room' and 'A Perfect Candidate' and 'American High.'"

"The theme is transition — people at a crossroads of their lives and how they are dealing with it. In this case you're in a moment in life when there's a child within you rushing to grow up as quickly as possible, and also an adult inside, desperately holding onto childhood as fiercely as possible." □