

# THE SUN

Sunday, August 31, 2003

Baltimore, Maryland

## Cameras go to college with 12 freshmen

Real-life drama gives this series a chance to make the grade  
Television

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Television is never more exciting than when it connects with the social rhythms of American life. Freshman Diaries, a 10-part documentary series making its premiere tonight on Showtime, connects with one of our deepest cultural rituals and lights up the screen with the energy it finds.

As millions of teen-age students depart for college and begin the profound passage of separation from parents, homes and adolescent identities, along comes this illuminating series, which chronicles a year in the lives of 12 University of Texas freshmen. Call it reality TV if you want. Directed and produced by Emmy-Award-winning filmmaker R.J. Cutler, the series is filmed and edited to the jumpy, quick-cut, edgy look and rhythm of MTV, and the echoes of that channel's landmark reality series, The Real World, are impossible to miss. But if this series is reality TV, it's the high end of the genre. It's fly-on-the-wall video verite, as the lives of these freshmen are simultaneously examined from the top down by Cutler's cameras -- and revealed from the bottom up by the cameras that Cutler gave each of the students. This is the place where the immediacy, and edge, of reality TV meets the power of the documentary film to show us the world as seen through the eyes of others.

Cutler has been operating at that artistic intersection for the last decade. He was nominated for an Oscar for his documentary The War Room, a backstage look at Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign. He also won an Emmy for American High, a reality series that followed 14 Chicago-area high-school students through their senior year.

He uses the same technique in Freshman Diaries that he did in American High. With permission of participants and the school, crews of two and three people using small cameras and minimal sound gear follow the students around the clock. There are no cables, lights or heavy equipment. The goal is to get the students to forget about the crews after a while.

The students, meanwhile, are trained in the use of video cameras before the filming starts and urged to use them to create video diaries. The goal is for them to become collaborators in the filmmaking process rather than merely its subjects.

But, while the technique is the same, the drama is much more intense than it was for the high-school seniors. Freshman Diaries shows students dropping out, cracking up, getting high, having sex, finding what looks like love and suffering through the soul-searching nights that one can only know when she or he is all alone and a long, long way from home.

### Engaging characters

The casting--and that's what it is when you are deciding which 12 teenagers your cameras will follow for a year -- resulted in a diverse group of freshmen. The students featured in the first two programs (the only segments made available to critics) are engaging both as individuals and campus types.

Kyle Kinney, one of the most popular students in his Texas high school, starts out as the most confident and self-assured of the group. He's full of himself and always ready with an all-knowing pronouncement.

"There's two different kinds of people," Kinney says to the camera. "There's one that just can't wait to get away. They are ready to start a new life and want to put everything behind them. But then there are people like me who loved everything that's behind them."

As he says this, viewers see videotape of Kinney cheering on a friend as the young man chugs alcohol until he vomits.

"I don't feel like a college student," Kinney continues. "I'm not in a new period. I'm in a transition period -- between the magical, boyhood, adolescent years. I still feel like I'm a senior in high school."

Before the end of the second segment of the series, Kinney's self-confidence has all but disappeared. His two best friends who came to Texas with him -- a couple of guys he described as having a "soul-deep" relationship with him -- have made new acquaintances and are spending less and less time with him. A final shot shows him sitting late at night in an empty cafeteria, ignoring his food as he stares blankly at a night-black plate-glass window. He looks as if he's about to cry.

Neil McGurk was not popular in high school, and he tells the camera that he knows why:

"All these people in this high school," he says holding up his yearbook, "they were [expletives] to me, because I'm gay. And that's exactly the reason. Yes, that's exactly the reason, because they said so. I hate this school. I hate them. But, hey, I'm in college now, so screw them all."

McGurk will find himself attracted to a female classmate and mightily confused by it. Then he'll enter into a relationship with Luis Rocha, a gay freshman also featured in the series, and wind up even more confused. McGurk says he "doesn't know how to be gay," but he's working on it.

Casey Switzer is working on her relationship with her father. A self-described "daddy's girl," she starts out trying to do just what her father wants, which is studying computer science. But she has no aptitude for it and really wants to study theater.

She does horribly in the classroom and becomes unraveled by her father's insistence that she stick with computer science and earn a practical degree. Finally, over dinner at an Austin



restaurant, she breaks into tears and pleads with her father, saying, "Don't you want me to be happy?"

"Not really," he says. "You think I'm happy in my job? I get sick every day when I go to work."

If her father wasn't such a bully, one would feel almost as sad for him as for his daughter. She responds by starting to drink, party and do things with boys that are not likely to make daddy too happy when he sees the series.

#### Cutting class

The most serious problem with the first two segments is that the freshmen are rarely seen in the classroom. One can only wonder whether all the drinking, partying and sexual encounters are truly representative of this teenage tribe in an anthropological sense, or are more a matter of Cutler editing the miles of videotape so that the series would be as titillating as a prime-time soap opera.

In the end, whether one calls it reality TV or a documentary, the filming and editing of real life to fit the commercial dictates of prime-time entertainment television is always suspect. And after seeing only two of 10 episodes, it's impossible to say whether Freshman Diaries will ultimately be more about truth or ratings.

But returning to campus for the next 10 Sunday nights on Showtime to see which way the series and the lives of these 12 freshmen will go promises to be one of the more intriguing TV trips of the fall season.

#### Off to School

What: Freshman Diaries

Where: Showtime

When: Sunday at 9:30 p.m. and 11 p.m.

In brief: Sex, sighs and video verite of 12 freshmen trying to swim in the big, deep lake of college. (Television)