

## HIGH SCHOOL CONFIDENTIAL

*Kirby Dick goes back to school*

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Filmmaker Kirby Dick was in the midst of making his bracingly intimate 1997 documentary *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan*, Supermasochist when he was struck by how much he enjoyed incorporating the footage taken by Sheree Rose, Flanagan's partner in life and art. "She has a real on-the-spot, amateur style," the filmmaker recalls, settling into an easy chair in his Silver Lake living room. "The more I cut, the more pleasure I got out of working with somebody else's material, how strongly the sense of personality came through." Dick had begun to muse on a way to make an entire film from somebody else's material when his daughter, then in the sixth grade, came home from school with an assignment. She was to send a teddy bear to someone, with a note instructing the recipient to send it to someone else. "The idea," says Dick, "was that the animal was supposed to circumnavigate the globe and come back. Hers never came back, but I wondered, 'Geez, what would happen if you did that with cameras?'"

Dick and his collaborators -- editor Matt Clarke, and producers Dody Dorn and Eddie Schmidt -- decided to find out and, with funding from HBO, sent High-8 video cameras around the country. The results, says Dick, were "very interesting" if somewhat diffuse, and the filmmakers speculated that transposing the method to a specific environment might boost the intensity. They approached John Marshall High School in Los Feliz, whose tremendously diverse student body -- representing approximately 90 different countries -- made it ideal territory for exploration. "This high school was fantastic," says Dick enthusiastically. "To see the sophistication and exuberance of the people who took the cameras. The footage was certainly more dynamic than what we were getting elsewhere."

Some 200 Marshall teens took a camera during the 1999-2000 school year -- 10 at a time would each shoot their lives for a week, then pass it on to 10 more. The result is *Chain Camera*, a compilation of footage shot by 16 of the Marshall juniors and seniors. By turns funny and heartbreaking, the film is also profoundly personal. For adult viewers who haven't spent their formative years in a reality-TV world, the sense of voyeurism can be slightly unnerving; for kids whose media-soaked upbringing has caused them to expect a life on-camera, it appears all too natural. For Dick, it was hitting the jackpot. "I'm a documentary filmmaker," he grins. "This is what I do." To him, the kids' startling openness is not only a natural function of their youth and media savvy, but of an eagerness to grab the controls of that media to express themselves. "The idea that a camera is an intrusion is somewhat of an old-fashioned concept," he says. "And I think that's empowering."

If giving voice to their ideas was empowering for the teens, hearing them out was just as potent for Dick, who became thoroughly immersed in the

footage. "We kind of fell in love with these subjects. You have to, there's a certain vulnerability in the giving of this material." After weeks of viewing the final tapes, he even began dreaming the kids' lives at night. It was the sort of mingling of consciousness that he'd been looking for. "One of the real pleasures of making a documentary," says Dick, "is that having a camera between you and a subject intensifies the relationship with that subject." Dick found that giving both Flanagan and Rose active roles in making *Sick* helped subvert the inherent formality of that relationship. With *Chain Camera*, the connection between himself and his subjects was just as intense, but with an interesting new wrinkle. "They weren't really shooting for me. They weren't saying 'This is my life, Kirby.' But who were they shooting for? It's for no one and everyone."

With *Chain Camera* ready to be seen by no one and everyone, Dick is already searching for other environments in which to start a new camera chain -- providing the filmmaker with plenty of other people's footage and, perhaps, many new nights of interesting dreams.