

'High School' goes confidential

Viewers privy to 12 girls' lives

By Gary Strauss
 USA TODAY

As those who have been through it have long known, high school can be tough on teens.

For Sharon Liese, who graduated in the mid-'70s, high school was difficult and unfulfilling. So when her daughter, Justine, entered ninth grade, Liese decided to put the lives of high schoolers under a microscope.

Four years and 500 hours of filming later, Liese's effort premieres tonight on cable's WE channel. The eight-episode *High School Confidential* (10 ET/PT) is part documentary and part reality show. It focuses on 12 girls who attended Northwest High School in Overland Park, Kan., from 2002 to 2006.

"High school can be a really painful, complicated time for a girl," says Liese, 49, a first-time filmmaker and single parent. "It was painful for me. And what girls are experiencing today in terms of angst, the struggles and how difficult it is to forge your own identity is similar to what women faced years ago."

Liese's effort is reminiscent of Michael Apted's long-running documentary series *Up*, which has

tracked the lives of several Brits every seven years. But *Confidential* offers a more compressed view of the physical and emotional transformation of adolescence.

There's Lauren G. (last names were kept confidential for the series), the good girl/drill team captain/homecoming princess who eventually has surgery to remove a brain lesion; Cappie, the party girl from a single-parent household; Jessi, the devout Christian who survives a miscarriage and suicide attempt; Sara, who marries by her senior year; and stepsisters Cate and Beth, whose recently married parents are about to divorce. Their stories — and those of others — dealt with sex, drugs, relationships, eating disorders, depression, peer pressure, self-mutilation and social cliques.

Liese was surprised at the scope and magnitude of the problems the girls faced at the upper-middle-class school of 1,600 students.

"I kind of expected a pregnancy; I certainly didn't expect three," says Liese, whose pre-*Confidential* filmmaking experience had been confined to corporate videos through her marketing and communications firm. "I expected they'd experiment with alcohol and drugs, but I didn't expect the intensity of it. And one decided to get married. To me, that was more shocking than pregnancy."

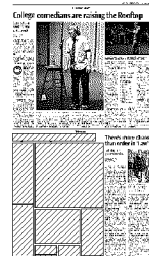
The girls were enthusiastic and grew more comfortable letting Liese into their lives. "They were so open to providing me access, there wasn't much we couldn't shoot," she says. Still, at edgier events, such as parties, she gave the girls video cameras to shoot footage.

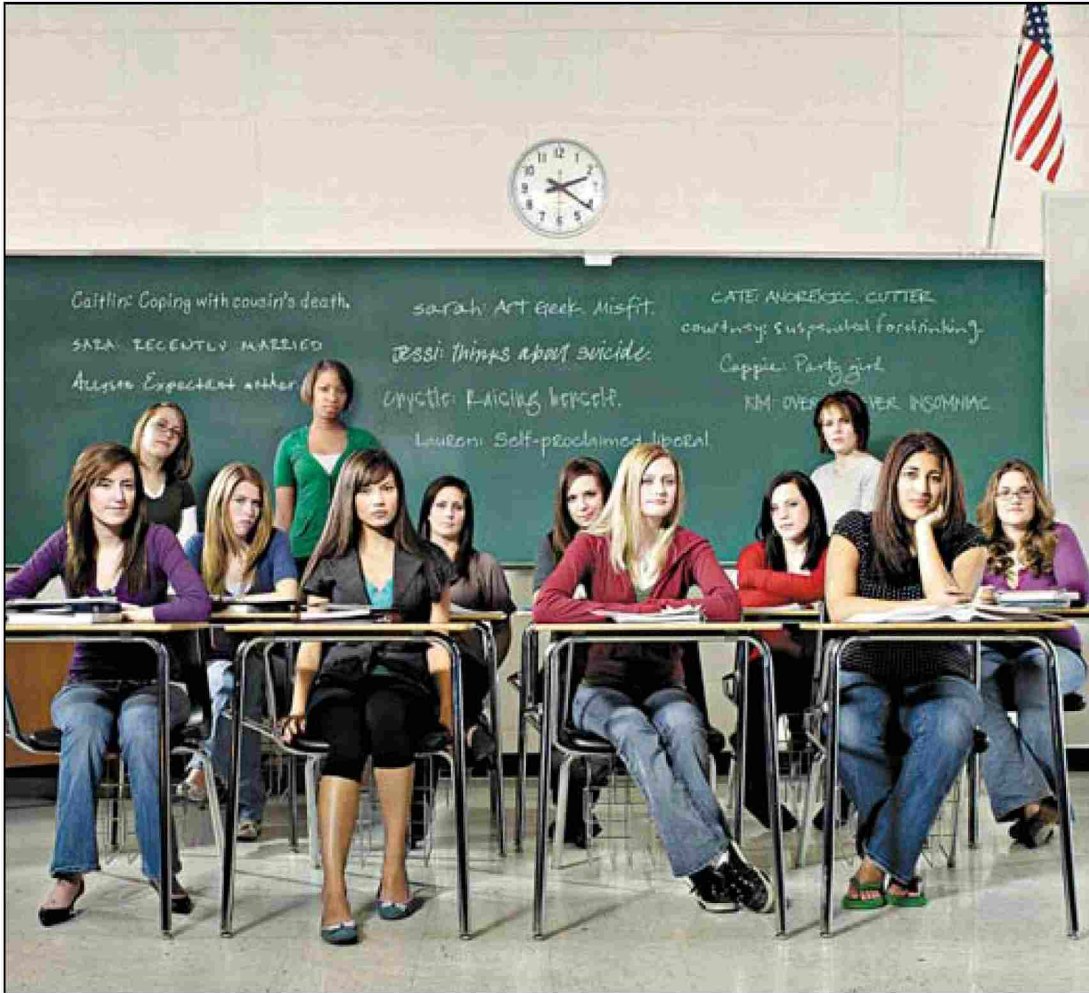
After viewing the series, school district officials are examining how to better meet students' needs. "A lot of the stories depicted in *Confidential* are indicative of the struggles kids go through in the 21st century," says Mike Slagle, assistant superintendent of the Johnson County school district. "If this is a slice of life, what are we doing to help kids along the way? We need to start that discussion."

All but one of the 12 *Confidential* girls have gone on to college. Liese hopes *Confidential* will provide parents and teens some insight into the difficulties of high school life. "I hope people use this as an opportunity to talk about things that are happening in their families."

WE, which is geared to women in their 30s, snapped up the project. "Once we saw this, it was a total bull's-eye for us," says WE general manager Kim Martin, mother of girls ages 9 and 12.

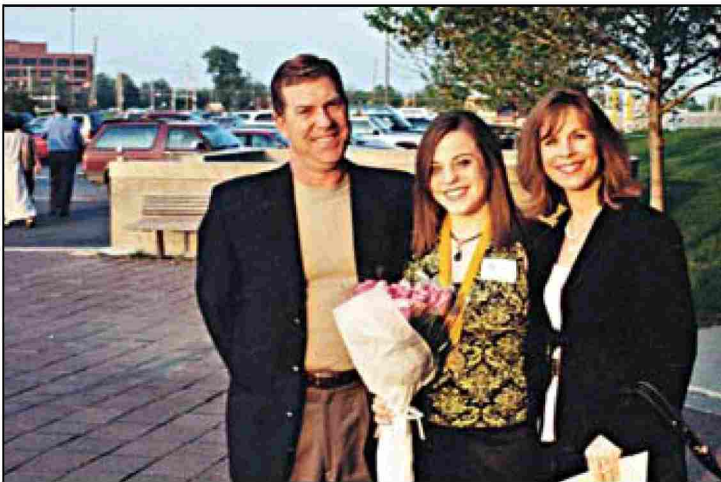
"We're committed to telling women's stories. This does exactly that. This is middle America. This is real life."





WE

The girls of *High School Confidential*: The series, premiering tonight, is part documentary, part reality.



WE

Highlight: Lauren G. with parents Bruce and Stephanie, after receiving the student Sunflower Ambassador award for compassion and honesty.