

III-High School -- the Social Scene

At a party, classmates ask the new girl, 'Are you a narc?'

By Shann Nix, Chronicle Staff Writer

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Chronicle reporter Shann Nix spent one month undercover as a senior at George Washington High School to find out what life is like for students during the educational budget crisis. This is the third of four parts.

I walk toward the high school birthday party, wondering what I have gotten myself into.

The street is dark, and I can see a few kids hanging around on the street outside the door. Luckily, I know one of them -- Sam, a compact, energetic Asian guy from my drama class. He gives me a hug and leads me inside.

Upstairs, crepe paper and balloons are taped to the walls, with a sign saying, "Happy Birthday Amy and Heather." A carton of soft drinks sits on the table.

Roughly 30 kids drift through the three rooms, listening to rap on the stereo, watching TV, eating chips and dip, scarfing tiny squares of pizza. Pretty low-energy scene. No parents, but they don't seem necessary.

I go outside and smoke a cigaret with a girl from my drama class named Taylere, wiry, with a fine-boned face and acerbic wit, and her friend Marcus, ginger-haired, wide shouldered and rangy -- both too ironic and bright for high school.

Trying to make conversation, I ask Taylere where she is planning to go to school. She tells me she wants to be an actress and will probably go to junior college first, then into some sort of show business.

My friend Erica from American democracy class has spoken of her

college plans with the same sort of vagueness, saying she will probably go to junior college or maybe UC Santa Cruz -- so sure she would not get into Berkeley that she isn't going to try. Both girls are obviously bright and strong achievers, and I am surprised that neither has more definite ideas about college.

Curious, I start to circulate and ask about people's college plans. The responses all sound alike: junior college, they say. Probably. Maybe. College of Marin. City College. Even the people I am sure will have an answer -- honors students, motivated members of volunteer organizations, supposedly the cream of a crop of nearly 3,000 students -- seem to have few specific ambitions.

With the state schools cutting classes and programs, even the most talented kids doubt their ability to get into a good school. Uri, a good-natured, red-haired guy from the Peer Resource Center (PRC), tells me later: "I'm an average student -- but today that's not good enough. It's the middle-class curse. Our parents don't have enough money to pay for college, but they have too much to qualify for aid. So where does that leave us? The answer for a lot of us is just to go to a junior college instead of worrying about it."

I eat a few pizza squares and take a swig of my warm soda. I am startled when Uri comes up to me and says abruptly, "Hey, some of the kids think you're a narc. Are you?"

"Sure," I say. "I'm a narc. And I'm going to run everybody here in for drinking root beer."

He laughs, and the tension breaks. Everyone seems to accept it as a joke. Only one girl objects.

"Don't you see," she says, "if she is a narc, it's part of her job to make you think she's not?"

I find out later that a couple of the guys followed me to my car that night, hoping to see something suspicious.

Monday, Oct. 5:

3 Classes in One

My new upper-level French class is really a combination of three classes -- French V, French VII and Honors, each with a different book and vocabulary level, which have all been crammed into one room under one teacher because two language teachers were laid off last year.

The teacher, a cheery, energetic young French native named Michel Daudin (we call him Monsieur Daudin, of course), is faced with the impossible task of supervising and teaching all three groups at once. He gives me his own text to take home for homework. There is no book at all for another new student, who came in after me.

During class, M. Daudin asks if we would rather have him concentrate on one group at a time instead of trying to do all three classes every day. While he was working with another group, we would do homework exercises. So on a good week, the students would have two days of instruction per week -- on a bad week, they would see the teacher only one day.

"I don't know what to do," he confesses frankly. "I'm going crazy. This is all crazy. We lost two teachers last year, and enrollment is up. Just until I can get some help." He rushes away, still distracted.

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Tuesday, Oct. 6:

Shadow Animals

Today is the first day of the French class experiment. M. Daudin tells us to get started working on an exercise that we have supposedly prepared the night before. The students make a half-hearted rustle as if to take out their books, but subside into blankness the minute he leaves and start making shadow animals with the light coming through the dirty windows -- there is no hope that these kids will work on their own unless someone stands over them and forces them.

In drama, we are each developing the character of an old person, complete with walk, talk and personality. It's a little mind-

boggling to be an adult playing a teen playing an old person -- but I'm giving it my best shot. After pretending to be a teenager every day, playing an old lady for an hour is a snap.

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Wednesday, Oct. 7:

French Quiz

It's the middle of the third week, and I feel like I've been here forever.

In French class today, M. Daudin asks questions in French, trying to sharpen our conversational skills. He asks me if I am happy here.

"No," Rachelle, the beautiful, coffee-skinned cheerleader answers for me. "She hates it here."

Then Daudin asked me if I have any friends. I say I have a few. And I do -- there are people who consistently invite me to lunch, sit next to me, say hello.

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Thursday, Oct. 8:

True and False

In English today, Mr. Davis sets us a challenge -- to tell a truth as if it were a lie and a lie as if it were the truth, and let the class try to figure out which is which. I have to laugh.

At the end of the week, the PRC is holding its annual training weekend in Marin to teach the kids how to counsel, listen and pay attention. Dona asks me if I'm going to go. Although secretly I would love to, I have decided that it would be too extreme an invasion of privacy. So I tell her that I can't, that I have been grounded for the weekend for fighting with my boyfriend. She is sympathetic.

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Friday, Oct. 9:

'Scared to Grow Up'

Rachelle flings into French class late, complains about being hungry, opens her greenish eyes wide when the teacher asks about her homework.

She describes the state of today's adolescents perfectly. "I'm scared to grow up," she says. "I'm dependent on my parents, but then I'm not. But I don't want to have to pay my own bills." What a confusing time. I am seized sometimes with the anxiety that must face them, going unskilled into a world already choked with laid-off workers.

Walking the halls, taking tests, going to class, there are moments when I feel that I actually belong here. I see the principal beckoning to me and wonder what I have done wrong. Then I realize with a shock that he wants to talk adult business.

I look at the kids in my classes and am grateful that I have already traveled part of the road on which they are just starting out. It sounds sometimes as if they see it as a long, weary way to go.

Rachelle sighs, puts her head down on her arms and says, "I'm sick of school. I want to graduate. Then I want to go to college. Then I want to graduate college. And then," she falters. "Well, I don't want to be rich, exactly . . . but . . . "

Tuesday, Oct. 13:

Quiet Pep Rally

There is a pep rally today. We sit, 3,000 strong, in nearly total silence as the sports teams line up on the field beneath the bleachers. There is scattered applause, but not much.

The biggest reaction is for a football player who constantly stands around "lip-locked" with his girlfriend, behavior that earns the couple much ribbing and abuse. "Where's your girlfriend?" someone shouts when he comes out on the field.

I ask Rachelle later why she thinks there is so little school spirit.

"I think it's because so many of the kids don't speak English," she says in lowered tones. "They just don't know what's going on."

There is a little more spirit at this afternoon's game against Lowell, which we win.

In American democracy, we are given a take-home exam, on which I accidentally get the highest score in two classes, drawing unwelcome attention to myself.

Vicki, the gentle, dark-eyed adult counselor of the PRC, tells me today that I have been voted an honorary member of the center. "Sometimes," she says, "a senior pops up out of the blue that we want to be part of PRC. You're that senior."

I am touched and feel doubly guilty for deceiving her. The physical stress and unfamiliarity of this assignment is lessening, but the psychological pressure gets worse and worse.

Wednesday, Oct. 14:

Cutting Class

While everyone else is in class each day, a good number of students cut class and drift through the halls, leaning on balconies or idling by the lockers, singly or in pairs.

In his office, Principal Vidal listens to the sounds in the hall. "You hear that?" he says, cocking his ear toward the door. "They shouldn't be out there. You know it. I know it. They know it. But I can't afford to pay hall staff -- so what can I do?"

Today Dona and Erica are leaving a note on the blackboard for another girl, to warn her of something terrible that her boyfriend has done. I am curious, trying to get them to tell me who it is and what happened.

"Don't tell her," says Uri. "She's a narc."

I've been shrugging it off when people say, "Hi, narc," to me in the halls, but this one irritates me, and I snap at him. "I really

doubt that the police care that much, Uri."

"Stop calling her narc," says Dona. "I don't see why everyone keeps calling her that."

"She likes it, don't you, narc?" says Uri.

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Thursday, Oct. 15:

Forms of Insanity

I have an administrative problem -- since my enrollment packet wasn't properly submitted, my name isn't on the teachers' rolls. I'm sure it only fuels their suspicions of me. Mrs. D., the drama teacher, says she will have to fill in my information by hand and asks for my birth date. I can feel my hands get clammy. "July 2, 1974," I say. It sounds wrong, but I am so panicked that I can't subtract well enough to tell.

Good discussion today in English on insanities in our society -- no problem getting the kids to speak up on this topic! They think it is insane that some people are so rich while others starve and that people put off fulfillment looking for security, counting on a pension that may not be there. Children of the S&L crisis, for sure.

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Friday, Oct. 16: Last Day of School

The fear of the first day of school and the exhilaration of the last never change. I run down the steps with the same queer feeling I had the day I graduated, a mixture of relief, nostalgia and regret. I survived my month as a high school senior. Now only one task remains -- to go back and tell them the truth.

TOMORROW: Letting the cat out of the bag.