

Fast Times, Revisited

By Elizabeth Weiss Green

It had been more than two decades since writer Cameron Crowe spent a year undercover at Clairemont High in San Diego, immortalized in a book and the 1982 movie *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. So writer Jeremy Iversen, a recent Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Stanford University then working at Merrill Lynch, thought the time had come to investigate youth culture again. So, with administrators' permission, Iversen bought a new wardrobe and a fake ID and enrolled at Claremont High (in the Los Angeles area) as a transfer student for the spring semester. Known as Mirador High in Iversen's book, the school's real identity was something students learned only after he admitted it on national television. *High School Confidential: Secrets of an Undercover Student* comes out September 19.

Why did you decide to drop everything and go back to high school?



Jeremy Iversen
 JEREMY IVERSEN

I had gone to boarding school, and I had grown up in Manhattan-and that's about as far from the normal American growing-up experience as you can possibly get. This was my chance to experience that.

You've said you wanted a *Saved by the Bell* experience. Did you find it?

I found *Saved by the Bell* on steroids-literally and figuratively. First of all, lots of people *were* on steroids. Second of all, you sort of imagine this John Hughes [movie] high school type thing. But then when you get there, and you actually see that's the reality. ... There was such a huge social life

component to things.

You raise some pretty frightening alarms.

The first thing is just that so many people were drinking, so many people were having sex, so many people were using drugs. But what seems to me to be the real crisis is the fact that there wasn't a lot of education going on. People were leaving just terribly uninformed about what was going on in the world and lacking lots of skills they would need to survive in the global economy.

One of the teachers appears to spend an entire class period just dissecting cats. Did that

really happen?

Yes. People played drinking games in class. I never had to write a paper longer than one page. I never had to find any source beyond the textbook. People thought Spain was in the Middle East, and they thought slavery ended in 1920.

Did you think they were stupid?

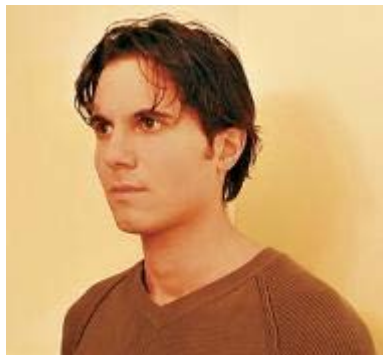
No. I've talked to high school teachers who say, "Oh, it's the students' fault. They don't want to learn." My perspective was, the teachers didn't seem to care. A lot of them would chat with five students about their personal life-and that was the class period. Meanwhile, the other 35 students would just stare off into space, talk to each other, text [message] on the cellphones.

Some of the kids you write about seem pretty seriously troubled: depressed, lonely, even alcoholic. You were pretending to be a kid too, but did you ever try to help them?

I tried to in subtle ways. One of my best friends [at Claremont] was 15, and he was thinking about doing steroids ... he was like, "Everyone else is getting so big. Maybe I should try this." And I was like, "No, dude"-I tried to phrase it in 15-year-old language-"your [genitals] will drop off." But when it's one person and there's an entire culture of 2,000 people around you, it's kind of hard to make that change without becoming an outsider.

Can we save American youth?

First you have to figure out what we're saving them from. I think the biggest issue is the educational issue. Adults drink, adults sleep with each other-and we don't freak out about that. But what is a concern is the fact that a lot of people aren't learning. This is not a nation of overachievers.



Jeremy Iversen
JEREMY IVERSEN

You announced that you were actually a fake high school student on Fox TV. A lot of students at the school seem not too pleased to learn that.

It's about fifty-fifty-about half of them are like, "That's so badass, that's so funny." I still talk to a bunch of them. And then, you know, another half of them-mainly people who didn't really know me-you know, said what they wanted to say about that.

They said you betrayed them and you exaggerated the truth.

A lot of the people at the school were drinking, a lot of them were having sex. The parents came back and said, "What is the meaning of this?" Obviously, this is exactly what happened. You can open up the local newspaper and the police blotters.

Your book shows some really disturbing racism. Several kids even subscribe to "white pride" philosophies.

That was something I was really shocked by. The racism disturbed me, the homophobia disturbed me, a lot of the lack of knowledge about the outside world, and the simplistic black-and-white viewpoints disturbed me. You always see the sound bite, "Oh, the millennial generation is so diverse." But diverse doesn't necessarily mean that the diversity is well-integrated and harmonious. You can have people from a lot of different races put together, but that doesn't necessarily mean that it's pluralistic and joyful.

Were you able to integrate into the different racial groups? It seems as if you spent most of your time with the white, cool kids.

No, it would just be ridiculous. It just wouldn't even make sense within the social reality in that school.