

6/11/04 NY Post



Shawn Roberts and Lauren Collins address tough issues like date-rape in "DeGrassi: The Next Generation."

'DeGrassi' de bomb with a new gen

By MICHAEL GILTZ

WHEN the stars of the hit high school drama "DeGrassi: The Next Generation" came to the U.S. for a nine-city tour, they suddenly realized how much the Canadian show has caught on with kids.

"They were treated like rock stars — all these screaming fans," laughs co-creator Linda Schuyler, whose show airs on cable channel The N Fridays at 8 p.m.

For anyone wondering what the fuss is about, tonight's show is a perfect introduction since it's an homage to the teen classic "The Breakfast Club" and an introduction to the characters.

"DeGrassi" is a Canadian institution that's been around in one form or another for 25 years. In Canada, it is CTV's highest-rated Canadian show.

It reportedly inspired Aaron Spelling to launch "Beverly Hills, 90210," but much of the noise recently came from its hot-button issues.

One recent episode on cutting — self-mutilation,

often by girls — made headlines when some teachers argued students copied the show.

Another, on abortion, has yet to air in the U.S. as The N, geared toward teens, figures out if and how to present it.

A third episode, on a main character coming out, prompted an outpouring of letters and critical praise.

"My whole attitude toward producing the show is that if kids are talking about it in the schoolyard, we can talk about it on the show," says Schuyler, a former eighth-grade teacher who decided to make a short film about teens in 1979 that led to "DeGrassi."

"I would much rather have them talk about some of these issues based on what they've seen on 'DeGrassi' rather than based on the misinformation they've picked up on the schoolyard, the movies and the Internet."

It is the second of eight new summer episodes, with another 22 shows hitting The N starting in October.