

DEGRASSI: EVERYONE'S SCHOOL

THE INTERNATIONAL
TV SENSATION
IS MORE THAN JUST A HIT SHOW

BY SUSAN MCCLELLAND

EARLY last September, when American high-school students should have been out buying textbooks and outfits for the new academic year, droves of them headed to New York City's Hard Rock Cafe to catch a glimpse of Adamo Ruggiero and some of the other stars of the hit, Canadian TV drama *Degrassi: The Next Generation*. Ruggiero, who plays Marco, and Lauren Collins, who plays Paige, were there for a promotional bash to celebrate *Degrassi's* sixth season. Since the program's begin-

(From left) Miriam McDonald, Daniel Clark, Cassie Steele and Jamie Johnston of *Degrassi: The Next Generation*.

nings more than 25 years ago, it has become the top-rated show on The N, an American digital-cable channel broadcast to 55 million households.

"The bash was chaos," says Ruggiero. "Kids were hurtling themselves onto the stage." At one point, the brouhaha dimmed and Ruggiero—who, last season, saw his character tell his traditional Italian father that he is gay—caught the glance of a young man in the crowd. "Thank you," the fan mouthed. Then the noise returned and the young man disappeared into the mayhem. "But the connection had been made," says Ruggiero. "It put in a nutshell, for me, how *Degrassi* has touched so many young people."

Homosexuality isn't the only tough

PHOTOS: COURTESY CTV

—and, in some cases, taboo—teenage issue the show has tackled. From date rape to self-mutilation to parent-teacher sex, *Degrassi* has distinguished itself as the show that will go where no others dare: Darcy posts photographs online of herself in a red bra and underwear, unintentionally luring a cyberpredator to her doorstep; Jimmy, paralyzed below the waist after a school shooting, struggles with his virility; Sean is jailed after hitting a jogger during a street race. “There aren’t shows out there that star teens telling stories from a teen’s point of view,” says Sarah Tomassi-Lindman, The N’s general manager and senior vice-president. “Quite simply, *Degrassi* fills a void in the teen market.”

In Canada, over one million people watch *Degrassi* on CTV. It’s our biggest media export overseas, airing in more than 120 countries. When a friend of Linda Schuyler’s—the show’s creator—was in China, a tour guide remarked to her, “Ah, you’re from Canada—home of Bethune and *Degrassi*!”

Schuyler, a former schoolteacher and co-founder of Epitome Pictures Inc., which produces *Degrassi* in a Toronto studio, oversees the show. She often brings in specialists—including teens—to ensure the stories reflect reality. “I tell my writers to be fearless in their storytelling,” says Schuyler. “If kids are talking about it in schoolyards and malls, we should be talking about it on *Degrassi*.”

Degrassi may be a Canadian icon, but fans in the United States call the show their own, too. “The first time we

flew *Degrassi* stars to New York to meet the public, it was like Beatlemania,” says Tomassi-Lindman. “We had to sneak them out through the back door, or they’d have had their clothes ripped off.”

U.S. critics have been equally supportive: In 2005, *Degrassi* won the coveted Television Critics Association Award for outstanding achievement in children’s programming. That year, the show also won a Teen Choice Award in the United States.

SCHUYLER’S *Degrassi* journey began in the 1970s, when the now 59-year-old began teaching Grade 8 in Toronto inner-city schools. It was a different world from Paris, Ont., where she grew up: Her students came from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and had family lives that were far from the stable, two-parent kind with which she was familiar. Then one day, Schuyler, who had been taking film classes in her spare time, decided to make a documentary about her students’ lives. “I wondered how they dealt with Canadian realities at school versus their first generation parents—many of whom didn’t speak English—at home,” says Schuyler.

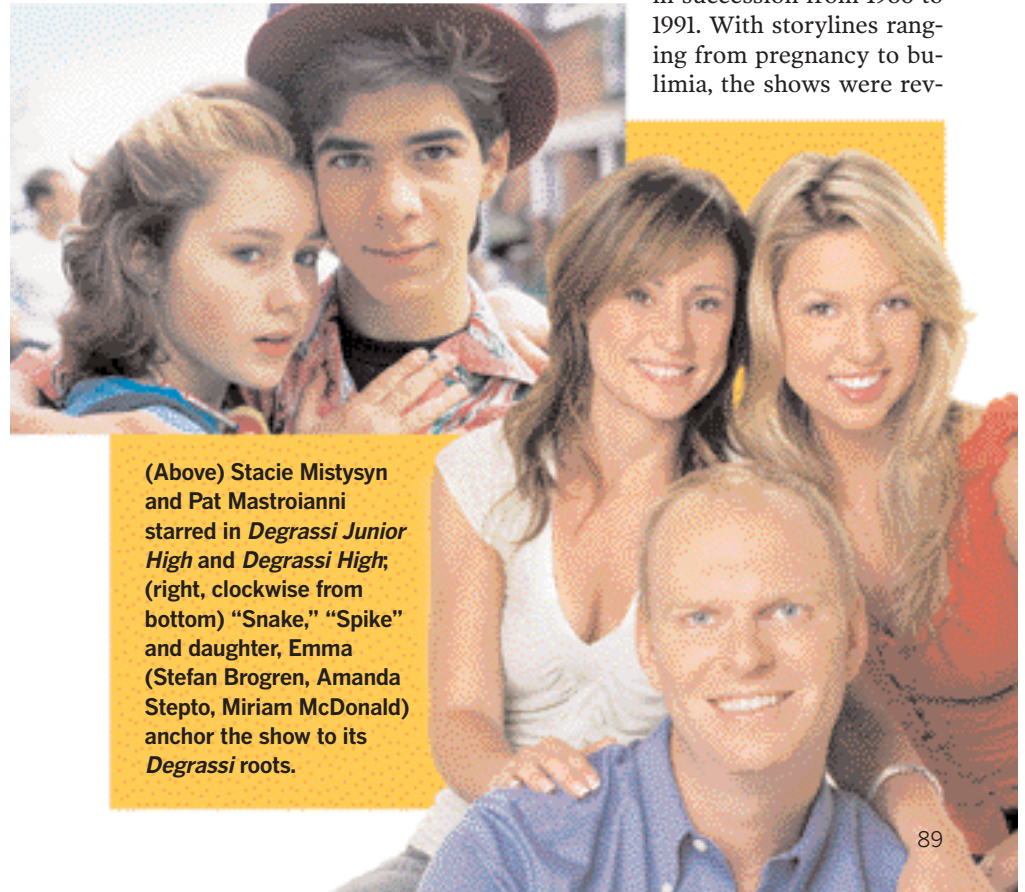
On Friday afternoons, Schuyler often screened films about teen life for her students. One film, *The Summer We Moved to Elm Street*—about a young girl living with an alcoholic father—generated a lively discussion. When one student came forward and said the film could have been about

her, Schuyler says, “it was a seminal moment in my teaching. I’m a huge believer in getting kids talking, in creating environments in which they feel less threatened and can be honest.”

In 1974, Schuyler took a year off to study film at the University of Toronto, then she returned to teaching. After four years, she quit her job to co-direct what she thought would be a one-off dramatic series for Playing With Time Productions (which she co-owned), in a *Degrassi* Street row house in

Toronto’s east end. Schuyler wore many hats besides co-director, including cook, costume organizer and chauffeur for the actors to and from the row-house set, which she rented from a friend. “I’d wake at 5 a.m., make sandwiches, then go get the kids, making sure they had a change of clothes for wardrobe,” says Schuyler.

In 1981 CBC picked up *The Kids of Degrassi Street* and scheduled it during prime time. *Degrassi Junior High* and *Degrassi High* followed, running in succession from 1986 to 1991. With storylines ranging from pregnancy to bulimia, the shows were rev-



(Above) Stacie Mistysyn and Pat Mastroianni starred in *Degrassi Junior High* and *Degrassi High*; (right, clockwise from bottom) “Snake,” “Spike” and daughter, Emma (Stefan Brogren, Amanda Stepto, Miriam McDonald) anchor the show to its *Degrassi* roots.

olutionary. "There were many after-school specials that would deal with teen pregnancy, but after two hours, the issues were all wrapped up," says Schuyler, contrasting the *Degrassi* series. "Our storytelling has always been messy. Yes, we have a conclusion, but there's always fallout, which is real life."

Schuyler thought her *Degrassi* days were over when the series went off the air. She then made two other Canadian shows, *Riverdale* and *Liberty Street*. Meanwhile, she and writer Yan Moore continued to talk about their former series, once noting that Emma (teen-mom "Spike's" baby on *Degrassi Junior High*) would be in junior high by now. That's when Schuyler decided to resurrect *Degrassi*, with Emma as a lead character. It paid off: *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, which first aired on CTV in 2001, is now bigger than any of its predecessors.

"*Degrassi* is on the cutting edge of youth culture," says Susanne Boyce, CTV's president of programming and chair of the CTV Media Group. While *Degrassi's* actors, writers, directors and producers are Canadian, she adds, "the storylines are universal."

Opal Vadhan, a 14-year-old, Grade 9 student from New York State, agrees. "The show hits home every time," she says. "I have friends who are struggling with cutting [self-mutilation] and bulimia. But by seeing how Ellie dealt with cutting and how Emma coped with an eating disorder, I know how to help my friends. I know where they're coming from."

Last season, *Degrassi: The Next Gen-*

eration again forged into new territory: Many characters graduated from Degrassi Community School the previous year, so the series followed what they were up to.

In an episode entitled "Shout," the pretty and popular Paige (played by Lauren Collins) sits in the common room of her business college, a freshman. She has hopes of becoming a high-powered businesswoman, "but she's in for some surprises along the way," says Collins. "The former head cheerleader is now a little fish in a big pond."

FOR HER part, it was the date-rape storyline from the second season that Collins, then 15, says was her "coming of age," both as an actress and a woman. The rape scene was not only her first experience with violence onscreen or off, it was also her first kiss. "I wanted to do justice to the show and to all those girls who have gone through this," she says. "It wasn't that Paige was pulled into an alley by a stranger; she was raped by a friend." At first, Paige blamed herself because she'd had a crush on the rapist. The guilt consumed her, and it was a long time before she told anyone what had happened.

Now, five years later, Collins still receives fan mail about Paige's handling of the date rape.

WHEN COLLINS and Ruggiero met the crowd at the Hard Rock Cafe in New York last fall, such serious storylines

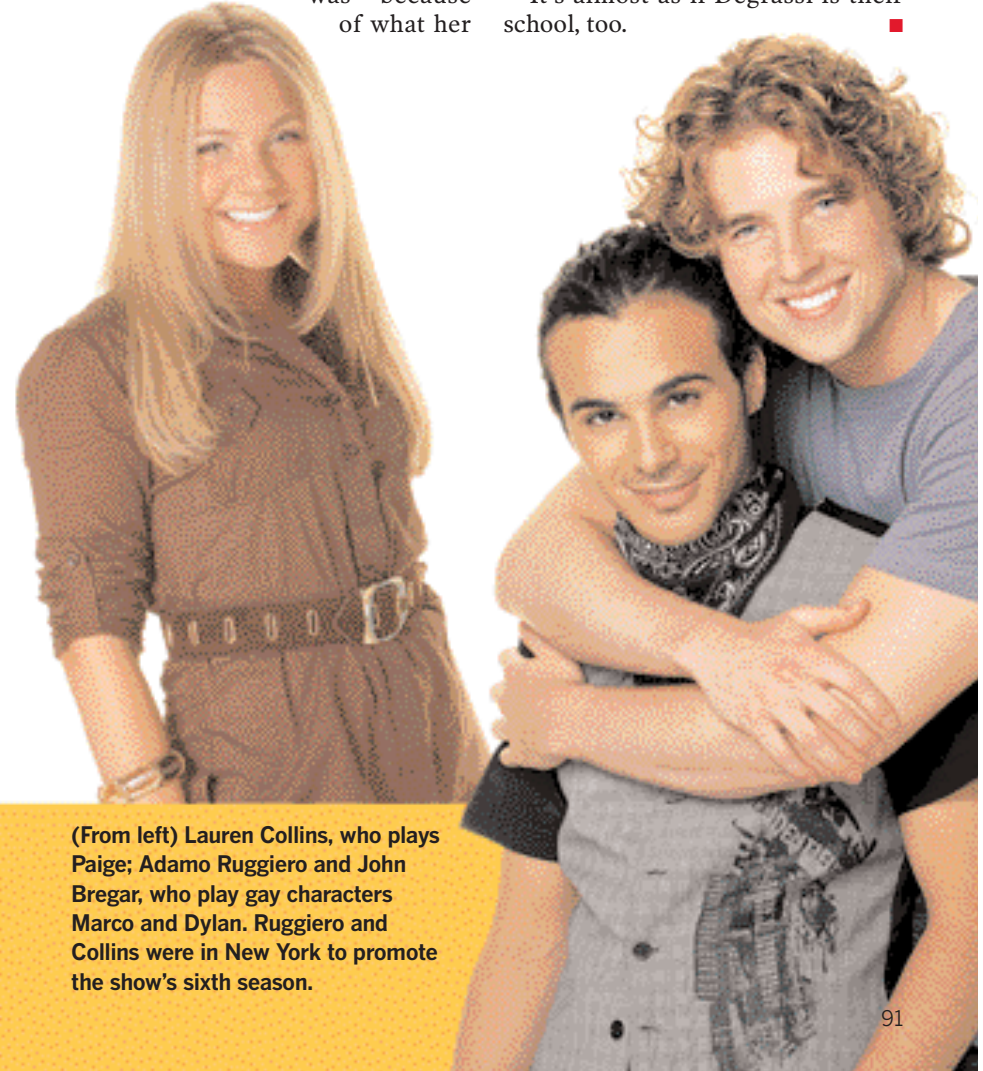
were far from Collins's mind. Instead, she found herself revelling in the spotlight. But as young women tugged her sleeves and thrust books at her to autograph, and as Collins heard the many "thank you's" from the crowd, she realized the response

was because of what her

character, Paige, had been through—and what she had overcome.

"It's mind-blowing that this TV show we're making in Toronto is actually helping people everywhere get past huge milestones in their lives," says Collins.

It's almost as if *Degrassi* is their school, too. ■



(From left) Lauren Collins, who plays Paige; Adamo Ruggiero and John Bregar, who play gay characters Marco and Dylan. Ruggiero and Collins were in New York to promote the show's sixth season.