

FILM THREAT™



by Phil Hall

Kavery Kaul's "Long Way from Home" is a sensitive, mature and thoroughly compelling documentary following the difficult paths of three teenage girls who enroll in private and prestigious New York prep schools. The girls are the proverbial fishes out of water in these tony environments: Cindy is the American-born daughter of Cambodian refugees, Sarah is an Egyptian Muslim and Sage is an African-American. None of them come from the economically privileged backgrounds that their white schoolmates enjoy.

All three are ready for the challenge, and not surprisingly there are setbacks along the way. Cindy's attempts at learning soccer and becoming part of the school's team are rough, but she pushes ahead with practice despite the obvious (to the viewer, at least) lack of athletic ability. Sarah is understandably touchy about how her classmates perceive her cultural heritage and religion, but she discovers a greater degree of indifference rather than hostility from her classmates. Sage acknowledges the catty nature of ninth grade girls, but for her part she intentionally keeps a lower and quieter profile to avoid feeding the perception of African-Americans being (in her words) loud and rowdy.

"Long Way from Home" is disturbing in its ability to puncture the happy myths of diversity and multiculturalism. The blending of different races, religions and economic levels is still not easy, even at this very late date, and the three girls in the spotlight discover that first-hand --- often with unhappy results (Sage notes the racial divide in the lunchroom, where white students and black students self-segregate at their own tables). The ability of all three to relate their experiences with eloquence and intelligence creates an extraordinary achievement that will provoke debate and dissection for those who dare to consider the serious lessons of this production. Non-fiction filmmaking doesn't get better than this.