

Naturally Obsessed: the making of a scientist

ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND

Directors' statement

Our intent is to make the world of science more vivid and accessible to a public that is all too often awed, bored or distrustful of science and for young people who are uncertain about a career in science. **Naturally Obsessed** helps viewers identify with the people who do science, understand what's involved in making a discovery, and feel the profound satisfaction of making a difference.

Synopsis

Naturally Obsessed tells a vivid, suspenseful story about a trio of students going for their PhD degrees. They are in a race to beat the competition to discover the switch that controls appetite in the human body – but the pressure is on, as each student also struggles with a personal challenge. Rob, a perennial dropout, dares himself to stay the course. Kilpatrick has to choose between the easy life and academic success. Gabriele hovers between high aspirations and self-doubt. Their guide and mentor, Larry, is a young professor deeply committed to passing on the baton of science. He urges his students to apply their creativity to solve tough problems, while encouraging them to accept the emotional roller coaster of doing science. Gabriele finally admits that she prefers to work in a team rather than put herself on the line and quits the PhD program. Kilpatrick, having battled Larry to get him through the PhD quickly, takes a job in business. Rob comes close to dropping out, but driven by his passion to make an impact and sustained by Larry's unreserved confidence in him, scores a breakthrough success and discovers himself as a scientist.

Science Background

Naturally Obsessed opens a penetrating view of laboratory life, provides unique insights into what it's like to do biological research and honestly portrays the quid-pro-quo of the apprentice system, by which students working for their PhD degrees work under a master scientist at the frontiers of biomedical research. Drawn from three years of filming, live actions scenes capture the day-by-day experiences of doing science, highlighting the ups and downs of the mentor student relationship, the collaboration that science depends on, and the self-knowledge that success requires. The film was shot at the Shapiro Laboratory at the Columbia University Medical Center. In a way that the lay person can easily understand, it presents a picture of the lab's advanced techniques in genetic engineering, protein chemistry and x-ray crystallography, which are paving the way for a new generation of structure-based drugs – “designer drugs” – specifically targeted to correct malfunctioning, disease-causing, proteins. (The remarkably successful HIV protease inhibitor was the first of its kind.)