

# Chicago Tribune

## **The badge becomes her honor “Code” Home in Chicago, Jennifer Beals doing what she can to hold on to transformative role as top cop**

By Steve Johnson  
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The place Jennifer Beals picks to meet is, like her countenance much of the time, serene, especially if you are able to focus on the scenery and set aside the scores of small children fluttering about on this weekday morning.

As we talk, about a role not taken by the Chicago actor who is best-known of late for her TV work, in "The L Word" and the current season's "The Chicago Code," we sit in two cushy chairs that face Lincoln Park, a small table in between. It's a spot that might be called the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum Interview Nook.

An adorable redheaded boy, maybe 4 at most, approaches, pressing his face to a glass wall directly behind us, as if Two People Talking is another exhibit to be studied. Suddenly, Beals' air, thoughtful, engaging, a little self-deprecating but also quite a bit cautious, melts away, and she is only a mother.

"Look at — *how cute are you? How cute are you? You have red hair.* Look at that. *Hi!* So unafraid, huh? Really sweet."

Still, even as two adults stare and smile and make goo-goo faces at him, the boy maintains his frank, open gaze. "*I know,*" Beals tells him. "You know, if you could keep that state, it would be pretty sweet. And painful all at the same time."

After our talk, she was preparing to head to New York and then Los Angeles to do publicity for "Chicago Code," whatever she can to nudge it off the bubble and into the category of "renewed." The DVR numbers have been strong, she says, but the ratings only middle of the pack and pretty much static since the Fox series debuted Feb. 7. Beals is facing the possibility that the show — which has changed her in several ways, and brought her back home — may come to an end.

"Literally, the other day, I pulled up to this cop car, and I rolled down my window, and the officer rolled down his window. And I said, 'I just want you to know, I love you. I love you.' And he looked at me a little baffled, then he laughed. I think he figured it out,

or else he was just chuckling because it was such a bizarre moment."

What he might have figured out is who Beals is: the person currently starring in "Code" as Chicago Police Superintendent Teresa Colvin, a fictionalized version of his boss. The role — of a tough woman who tamps down her personal life to put everything into the job — has made Beals more politically engaged, she says, more willing, for instance, to pick up the phone to call an alderman about trying to get so-called "crumb rubber" children's play surface banned.

It has also forged feelings that spill over, she says, into the real world. "I have a profound love for the CPD now," she says. "I just do. I do. I feel like they're my team."

She delivered the message to the stunned officer in part to counteract, she says, the treatment she witnessed Chicago cops receiving in the Austin neighborhood on the West Side as she prepared for the series.

"Usually these guys are being spit on during the day, at least in Austin," says Beals, who grew up on the South Side and the Gold Coast and was schooled, for 14 formative years, at the private Francis W. Parker School in Lincoln Park. "I went on a ride-along for the day, and there was no respect. It was horrifying. You realize there are a minority of officers who are not behaving in a way that is deserving of respect, but there's the majority who are, and they're having to take the brunt of other people's behavior. It's a brutal job."

It's not that she stays in character so much, she explains, as the characters tend to stay in her a little. Other times, though, you just have to let it go.

Beals has hung around as an actor — albeit employed in different ways than might have been expected, given the way she sped out of the gate. "Flashdance" — chair, water, off-the-shoulder top — made her a love object of the 1980s, her name invoked by young men of the era in the same way, for instance, that Megan Fox's is today.

But Beals continued at Yale University. Before graduating, in 1987, she married film director Alexandre Rockwell and has since remarried, to Ken Dixon, a Canadian entrepreneur and film technician, the father of her 5-year-old daughter.

Her career steered, for a time, toward independent movies. Lately, as has been the case for so many woman actors in their 40s (she turned 47 in December), the best roles have been on television: Bette Porter, the elegant lesbian art gallery owner in "The L Word," and now the first-year top cop in Chicago battling to bring down the corrupt alderman who sponsored her for the job.

At a state event on the "Chicago Code" set in September, in Cicero, Beals delivered a nicely crafted speech on what it meant to film in Chicago. Gov. Pat Quinn also spoke, and while he, too, hit all the economic touchstones, he mostly seemed to want to talk about "Flashdance," even tying in Beals' on-screen job as a welder (by day, a dancer by night) with a point about the importance of union jobs.

Beals was not put off by the politician's seeming fixation, she says. "Everybody has their reference point, and it's reflective of what their experience is. I went into a meeting in Los Angeles. The producer was talking to me about doing a film this summer. I'm obviously not sure if I'm available or not, but his point of reference for me was 'Roger Dodger.' And a lot of people come up to me about 'The L Word.' Some people come up to me about 'Book of Eli.' There's a whole other group of people that's 'Devil in a Blue Dress.'"

So looking back over all of that, have things gone according to plan? How does the career look to you?

"I think it's mostly happy accidents," she says, laughing. "It's really nice that you would even intimate that there could be any kind of planning going on."

She thinks again. "It looks like a marathon," she says. "And I'm proud that I'm not a DNF (did not finish). I'm not a DNF yet. I just kept going. I think that's been the key is just to keep going and really try to get better and try to be as truthful as I can and hope that good things come my way."

She knows that a small-budget, Canadian dark comic film she was in, "A Night for Dying Tigers," will be out this summer. But beyond that, she doesn't know much. If "Code" is renewed and she is able to stay in Chicago (her family is renting a home for now), "I'd like to look on the South Side a little bit. People are talking about Kenwood. I'm not sure. And that's kind of like the life of an actor. You just don't know where you're going to end up.

"It's kind of like being in the circus. Or, at least in the circus you have a planned tour, I would guess. With television and films, you know, any moment you can be packing up and going somewhere else. Eventually we're going to have to pick a place so my daughter can have at least some stability. I would love it to be Chicago. I would love it for her to be able to grow up here."