



"ER" built strong Chicago ties and took its setting seriously

By Mark Caro and Robert K. Elder
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Chicago-based producer/production manager Roger Anderson had two of his nine heart attacks while on the set of "ER" but didn't go to the emergency room either time.

"You get wrapped up in your job," he said. "You never want to slow down production."

Instead, he took nitroglycerin tablets during the first attack amid the filming of a Grant Park riot scene. After the second time, which happened while he was running up and down stairs with series executive producer John Wells, he sat in his car for a bit, then eventually drove home to Barrington before seeking medical attention.

Anderson's payback for such dedication or foolishness? Wells named a character after him in the series finale, which airs at 8 p.m. Thursday on WMAQ-Ch. 5. (An hourlong retrospective is at 7 p.m.) The fictional Roger Anderson visits the emergency room complaining of chest pains but turns out to be having an anxiety attack triggered by learning that his teenage children are having sex—with each other.

Anderson, whose own kids are no longer teenagers, laughed at the premise. He'll miss "ER," a series that kept him employed full time in his hometown for the past 15 years. He's not the only one.

With its rat-a-tat medical jargon, hand-held camerawork and charismatic leads, "ER" became a national phenomenon upon its Sept. 19, 1994, debut. It also became a local institution, pumping about \$33.5 million into the Chicago-area economy over the series run, according to the Illinois and Chicago Film Offices.

Situated at the fictional County General Hospital but modeled on the former Cook County Hospital, this one-hour medical drama took its Chicago setting seriously. Rather than following the lead of other series that shoot solely in Los Angeles only to insert occasional stock skyline shots to represent the setting, "ER" cast and crew usually visited Chicago four times a year—spring, summer, fall, winter—to capture the city's ever-changing climate.

They shot in neighborhoods and amid familiar downtown scenery. They had a runaway Sherman tank crush several police cars and a newspaper stand on State Street.

They created the hospital's helipad by landing helicopters atop the old Chicago Fire Department Training Academy in the South Loop, and, after that was decommissioned, the helipad atop the Hilton Chicago. Julianna Margulies' Nurse Carol Hathaway lived in a Victorian home alongside the "L." Anthony Edwards' Dr. Mark Greene had a condo in a newer South Loop development.

"It broke up the monotony of shooting on a soundstage in Burbank, but it also lent an air of authenticity to the show," said Noah Wyle, the longest-tenured cast member as Dr. John Carter. "Some of my fondest memories over the last 15 years are from my trips to Chicago."

"ER" debuted simultaneously with another Chicago-set hospital drama, "Chicago Hope," which took place in a relatively upscale environment similar to Northwestern Memorial Hospital.

One show would hit town on the heels of the other, but onscreen—at least before "Chicago Hope" went under after six seasons—they presented two perspectives of Chicago.

Yes, they both filmed on "L" trains and platforms, but "ER" ventured deeper into neighborhoods and factory districts while keeping the cameras moving.

"The style of shooting we had was just inherently a little different—a lot of Steadicam shots, a little more from the point of view of the people, as opposed to establishing shots," said "ER" producer/director Chris Chulack, who oversaw most of the Chicago shoots. "It gave the city a different kind of look because we were always traveling, whether walking down Michigan Avenue or on a Wendella boat ride or in a helicopter traveling over the city."

"ER" traveled to Chicago 54 times. In some recent years, as ratings were slipping, it hit town just three times a year, and the annual amount spent here dipped from \$2.9 million in 2006 to \$2.3 million in 2007 to \$1.4 million in 2008, according to the Illinois Film Office. Also, Chicago Film Office director Rich Moskal noted, "right after 9/11 they skipped an entire year just because traveling the show seemed more complicated back then."

Financially, "ER" didn't have the economic impact of a series that actually is based full time in Chicago. A&E's Patrick Swayze cop drama "The Beast" spent \$16 million just while filming an 11-episode season here last year, Illinois Film Office managing director Betsy Steinberg said. A supervising producer on the CBS show "Early Edition" told Steinberg that the series pumped close to \$200 million into the local economy over its four-season run from 1996 to 2000.

But "ER" nonetheless provided steady work to a locally based crew that appreciated having a reliable client for so long. "Even in years where we saw very little production going on, when Canada was gobbling up a lot of business, we always felt reassured that

'ER' would come back to Chicago and shoot here on a regular basis," Moskal said.

Meanwhile, Steinberg said the show certainly has made her job easier as she pitches the state for TV and movie work. "When I'm in Los Angeles and I'm talking to television producers, they can say, 'Oh, right, we know you can handle a lot. "ER" has been there for 15 years,'" she said.

Even the medical workers at Cook County Hospital felt an impact, particularly before the original facility was supplanted by the newly built John Stroger Jr. Hospital in 2002. "Early on in the show, when there was more of a direct link to old County Hospital here, I think more people made the connection," said Marcel Bright, director of public affairs and communications for the Cook County Health and Hospitals System.

Although that connection has faded a bit, doctors there say patients still comment on the show. "They say things like, 'This doesn't seem like how it is on TV,' or, 'This is just like "ER," ' " said Kevin Kern, an emergency medicine physician at the facility for about 12 years. "They might say some of the more attractive nurses or doctors look like someone on the show."

Kern said the show has been a positive because "it gets people to understand how ERs work and how hectic they can be." Unlike newer medical shows such as "House," the cases on "ER" have been fairly realistic, though "we might see all that stuff in a month, but we don't see it in an hour."

Sandy Gibson, a family practitioner at Cook County since 1993, agreed, though she wasn't sure about all of those romances. "It may happen here, but I never see it," she said.

In Chicago, "ER" shot in high-humidity 95-degree heat and a 70-below-zero wind chill. Anderson recalled having a snowball fight with George Clooney in Olive Park and thinking regretfully, "I can't throw it at his face; he's an actor," only to wind up with Clooney dragging him by one leg through the snow and taunting, "Roger, is this all you've got?"

After a long day on the set, the cast and crew invariably would retire to the bar at the Ritz-Carlton, their hotel base. They'd also venture out to various steakhouses and blues clubs. "We'd always end up at Kingston Mines or Buddy Guy's," Wyle said, noting that they caught the bluesman's residency at Buddy Guy's Legends during their last visit in January.

Wyle's affection for the city and its workers is such that he hopes to return with a romantic comedy he's trying to direct called "The Prince Test."

"Chicago's where I want to place it," he said, "and I know all the crew members and locations I want to use."