

## **'Chicago Fire' actors willingly feel the heat**

By Lori Rackl

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Flames light up the top-floor windows of an abandoned warehouse near McCormick Place as firefighters try to save some homeless men trapped in the smoke-filled building. The people involved are all actors in the new TV show "Chicago Fire," and the warehouse isn't really burning down. But the scenario is rooted in reality.

"Most of the action scenes are based off actual things that have happened in Chicago," said Chicago Fire Department veteran Steve Chikerotis. "I have 33 years on the job, so I don't have a hard time finding storylines."

Deputy District Chief Chikerotis spends his off-duty days as a consultant on "Chicago Fire," which chronicles the personal and professional lives of first responders at fictional Engine Co. 51.

From executive producer Dick Wolf, the force behind the "Law & Order" franchise, "Chicago Fire" filmed its pilot in March and started shooting subsequent episodes this summer at locations across the city, including a soundstage at Cinespace Film Studios and real-life Engine Co. 18, 1360 S. Blue Island, on the Near West Side. The show premieres Wednesday on NBC.

Chikerotis collaborates with both the writers and the actors to make the show as accurate and credible as possible, at least by Hollywood standards. In reality, no fire department in the country has a staff this attractive.

Chikerotis, who also worked on the Chicago-set 1991 fire flick "Backdraft," has a small role in the second episode. Most of the time he's behind the scenes, teaching actors how to pass for plausible firefighters.

"I had them in live fire conditions, climbing ladders, swinging axes, wearing SCBAs (self-contained breathing apparatuses)," he said. "They have to look natural."

Christian Stolte might look the part of his character, a middle-aged fireman named Mouch. But a natural firefighter he is not.

“I’m not cut out for this,” said the 50-year-old Skokie actor, surrounded by fire trucks on 23rd and Indiana, where the warehouse scene was being filmed in August for the fourth episode. NBC has ordered 13 episodes, with nine more on the way if the show gets picked up for a full season.

“We had to go in the burn room, masked up, zero visibility, intense heat,” Stolte said about his training. “Even though you’re getting air through your mask, there’s that closed-in feeling, and I’m pretty claustrophobic.”

Naperville native William Smillie, who plays one of the hotshots in the department’s rescue squad, had the opposite reaction to learning the ropes.

“We came back from the first day of ride-alongs, and I called my best friend from high school and said, ‘If I’d done that ride-along when I was 18, I’d be a firefighter now instead of an actor,’ ” Smillie said.

Smillie, a Naperville Central High School graduate, now lives in Rogers Park. He’s one of several “Chicago Fire” actors with local ties.

Another Naperville Central alum, David Eigenberg (“Sex and the City”), stars as a firefighting father of four with money problems who loses his house — but not his sense of humor.

Yuri Sardarov, who grew up in Northbrook, is the station’s low man on the fire pole until a newer “candidate” (Charlie Barnett) joins the crew.

Cast member Joe Minoso had spent the last several years living on the North Side, making a name for himself in Chicago theater and, more recently, on the premium-cable drama “Boss,” where his character famously got his ears chopped off last season.

“I had some momentum going so I figured I’d take the big leap and move to L.A.,” Minoso said. “The day I got my lease approved in California was the day I booked this gig.”

He, Barnett and Sardarov now share an apartment in the city, where they regularly host Saturday night poker games attended by some of the Chicago firefighters they’ve befriended as well as their fellow actors, including Taylor Kinney, Lady Gaga’s beau (insert “Poker Face” joke here).

Kinney (“Vampire Diaries”) plays Lt. Kelly Severide, a cocky leader of Squad 3, one of the department’s elite units trained in scuba diving and other specialized skills. The

actor spent nearly two weeks tagging along with a couple of squad units stationed downtown and in Englewood.

“You’ll have lulls where you don’t have a call for hours, then all of a sudden, the bell goes and you’re out,” Kinney said. “It could be pin-ins, accidents, domestic disputes, gunshots.”

A big part of the show is Kinney’s character butting heads with Jesse Spencer (“House”), who plays a lieutenant on Truck 81. Kinney detected a real-life squad-versus-truck rivalry at the stations where he hung out.

“[Squad] had a separate table and talked smack with the truck guys,” he said. Many of the actors spent overnight shifts at fire stations throughout the city, trying to get a complete picture of the job.

“You get a look into what these guys do when they’re not fighting fires, which is watch a lot of romantic comedies,” Sardarov said.

Ride-alongs weren’t just for those with firefighter roles. Lauren German (“Hawaii Five-O”) and Monica Raymund (“The Good Wife”) shadowed a pair of Chicago paramedics for their parts on the show.

“We rode in the ambulance with them, watching them work,” Raymund said. “I had to stop dry-heaving a couple of times.”

Adrenaline-pumping scenes will be a hallmark of the series, but they won’t always involve flames.

“We try in every episode to have two big, very ambitious action sequences, not all fire,” said co-executive producer/director Joe Chappelle, whose TV credits include “Fringe,” “CSI: Miami” and “The Wire.”

For nine months a year, the Evanston resident typically would spend five or six days a week in another city because of his career in television.

“This is the first time I’ve worked in my hometown in 17 years,” he said — happily.

“Chicago Fire” is one of four TV drama series filmed in Illinois over the last year that have pumped more than \$92 million into the state’s economy and created at least 1,200 jobs, according to statistics released last week by Gov. Pat Quinn’s office. The other programs are Fox’s “Mob Doctor,” Starz’s “Boss” and MTV’s “Underemployed,” which

debuts Oct. 16. Later this month, the pilot for USA Network's "Sirens" starring Denis Leary is scheduled to start shooting locally.

The state offers a 30 percent tax credit on money that productions spend on goods and services in Illinois — a savings that's especially welcome on a series about firefighters.

"There's a lot of police shows because they're cheaper to film; our budget is much higher," Chikerotis said. "Fire means a lot of stunt people and special effects."

It also means a lot of smoke, judging by the dark, impenetrable insides of this burning warehouse, where the sweat-stained actors are searching for bodies.

"Shows like this let you see through the smoke," Chikerotis said. "That's about the only thing that's less than real. The smoke has to be lighter so you can see these good-looking actors. Otherwise they could take ugly guys like me and just throw them in there."