

10-4, SQUAD 51

By Hannah Louise Shearer

My heart clutched when I saw the big rig and paramedic ambulance in front of my condo: never a good sign, especially considering the average age of my neighbors. I felt enormous relief when everything was okay, then my eyes filled with tears of pride.

My first job, coordinating research between NBC's *Emergency!*, the Los Angeles County Departments of Fire, Health, and the Harbor General doctors running the Paramedic Program, ensured the show was authentic in essence and procedure. Eventually I worked my way from research assistant to producer to writer. *Emergency!* was as accurate as possible, creating, as Robert A. Cinader called it, the "illusion of reality", while still entertaining people for an hour.

Sid Sheinberg first came to Bob and Jack Webb with an idea for a show along the lines of an international "Rescue 8." Bob was a research nut who absorbed the atmosphere around him as easily as others breathe in and out. He discovered something closer to home: a pilot "paramedic" program, originated in Northern Ireland, mandated by the California State Legislature for a probationary period in L.A. County. The first gleaming red squad was housed at Station 8, or "8's" in West Hollywood, where the County Paramedic program was born, and was then struggling for life. Bob created a show around it, his theory being you could educate people if they didn't realize you were doing it. He believed if you presented them with something noble in an entertaining, humorous way, the audience would then demand it in their own lives. He was right. All over the country people began to demand that "paramedic thing" they saw on NBC every Saturday night for six years. They eventually got it.

Bob's creative process was his own; he easily handled the pressure of executive producing 22 hour shows a season, with only two producers, and 15 or so freelance writers. For an hour every afternoon, the fire department light he'd installed over his office door glowed red -- no entry while he played gin with production cronies as his subconscious worked on the day's script problems. He started writing about 7 at night, just when panic was setting in. His first drafts were letter perfect. He taught, sometimes none too gently, that there was no room for ego, the show's vision always came first; that events and character had to make sense within the world you've created; that the integrity of a character is much more important than a cheap sight gag; that you can write heroes and make audiences like and respect, rather than envy, them. For 126 episodes he refused to do a show about arson because there was plenty of other story material, so "why give weirdoes instructions how to burn down a building?"

He demanded all writers ride with the paramedics before doing a script, so they'd be steeped in the reality, and translate it into responsible entertainment. I was a young girl when I went on my first ride-along at 127's in Carson. It was exciting hanging around the firehouse, cooking chili with the guys, waiting for the alarm tones to blare -- then we got our first call, an old woman with chest pains. We drove through red signals, lights flashing, dodging idiots who didn't pull over. The piercing sirens shrieked in my head, my palms were sweaty, I was sure I'd throw up. When we got there I realized I was useless. I stayed out of the way, watched and learned. Someone real was hurting, it wasn't sanitized, it wasn't pretty, and these guys were pros. I was hooked: I wanted the audience to understand what firefighters did day in, day out, to know they were flawed human beings, good-hearted, overgrown kids who did good work.

I couldn't appreciate then how much the show would mean, to me personally, and to the public. Bob Cinader appreciated it, though. He was a visionary who died 14 years ago last month, much too young. Whenever I think of him, I remember the Talmudic quote, "*Whoever saves one life, it is as if he saved the entire world.*" There's no doubt about Bob's karma -- his extraordinary legacy goes far beyond those lucky enough to work with him.

Emergency! didn't win critical accolades or Emmys, but it was the finest television has to offer. It not only held up a mirror to society, it stimulated a profound, positive force for change. We delivered a 29-33 share opposite *All in the Family*, the show was on time, under budget, our stars generally behaved themselves, but the industry dismissed its success because the show wasn't deemed "serious" drama.

NBC canceled *Emergency!* with a 28 share. The don't-blink-you'll-miss-him-boss of NBC, Irwin Segelstein, decided vignette-style shows didn't work. I don't know where Mr. Segelstein is, but the vignette is alive and well. If you don't believe me, you can watch *Emergency!'s* sophisticated, brilliant grandchild, *ER*.

Emergency! and Bob Cinader received hundreds of awards for meritorious achievement in advancing, by ten years, the evolution of emergency care. For Bob, the growth was synergistic; he became one of the country's foremost experts on paramedics and advised politicians and fire departments how to make the system better. In 1985, Station 127 was re-named the Robert A. Cinader Memorial fire station. In the middle of the ceremony, the refinery across the street started to explode, fireballs visible from our folding chairs. Half the county rigs in the area attended the dedication -- they emptied out

rather quickly to go save lives, leaving us with only a small audience. I could sense Bob looking down, chortling in between gin hands.

It gratifies me to know the show still lives, in the spirit of the people who were influenced by *Emergency!* to become paramedics, nurses, or firefighters, and in the lives of the grandparent, sister, mother or father who was injured in an accident or suffered a heart attack, and was saved by a paramedic.

The physician's credo is "First Do No Harm". I believe this should be the credo for all human beings. What I learned from Bob was not only to do no harm, but to try to do good -- the audience is listening.

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