

LOS ANGELES BUSINESS JOURNAL

Up Front



How Iraqi vets like Steven Yeschin are learning to run businesses. **PAGE 3**

News & Analysis



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SPECIAL REPORT: TECHNOLOGY

The Next Big Things

The Business Journal took a look at who's getting the most patents locally. One big patent filer is a defense contractor whose innovations often end up in Hollywood. Many patents are serious, such as the one for Ron Udell's soft capsules (right). But some are quirky, such as a box that helps cats scratch themselves. **BEGINNING ON PAGE 19**



Lights, Camera, Build! A camera operator films 'L.A. Hardhats' documentary series.

Men at Work

Making TV shows about grit and danger

By **BRETT SPORICH** Staff Reporter

WHEN it comes to bringing machismo to the masses, there's nobody like Thom Beers, the producer of cable documentary series such as "The Deadliest Catch" and "Ice Road Tractors." Beers, chief executive of Burbank-based **Original Productions**, has created a genre of reality show that focuses on the gritty realism of

the American blue collar worker.

Now he has turned his cameras on downtown Los Angeles with a show called "L.A. Hard Hais," a behind-the-scenes look at the challenges faced by the men and women responsible for constructing a 23-story condominium high-rise named Evo in the heart of the city. The series debuts this week on the National Geographic Channel.

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Tide's Turning at Queen Mary Site

DEVELOPMENT: New owners plan amusement park, hotel.

By **JOEL RUSSELL** Staff Reporter

The new owners of the Queen Mary are planning a marina, an onshore amusement park, a hotel and an office building near the landmark ocean liner.

Plans are still in the early stages. In fact, artists' renderings of the project are four to six weeks away from public view, according to Mike Murchison, spokesman for **Save the Queen LLC**.

the investment group that bought a lease for the 74-year-old ship and an adjacent 45 acres in a bankruptcy court last November. He declined to give many details because his group will explain more in a private meeting with Long Beach city officials this week, but Murchison said the amusement park would have rides, movie theaters, restaurants and themed retail stores. The marina would feature 200 slips, including large spaces for

200

Number of slips to be in marina at planned Queen Mary Island.

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None Signed Up For Truck Plan

PORTS: Lack of participation could lead to problems at docks.

By **RICHARD CLOUGH** Staff Reporter

With just a few weeks left before the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach plan to kick off a massive truck replacement initiative, local officials have yet to sign up a single motor carrier under the controversial clean air plan.

The sluggish pace has many trucking companies openly concerned about the ports' ability to ensure a sufficient workforce when the programs begin in October. Port officials, likewise, are worried that a lawsuit filed last week by the American Trucking Association, a powerful industry group, in opposition to the truck programs will deter motor carriers from

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Guru of Grit: Thom Beers at his desk made from an airplane wing.



Construction: Workers on the Evo project in downtown L.A. will be the stars of 'L.A. Hardhats.'

Entertainment: Showing Reality of Gritty Work

Continued from page 1

"We're not looking for girls in bikinis to battle it out on some island," Beers said. "We look for real people doing extraordinary things and then we climb aboard for the ride."

Filmed over a two-year period, the six-part series tells the story from the point of view of the contractors, with each episode following one particular trade — including ironworkers, concrete crews, electricians, plumbers and glaziers. Using a four-man film crew and a number of time-lapse cameras, "Hard Hats" highlights the pressures, rivalries and setbacks the workers experience as they translate paper specs and blueprints into a skyscraper.

Dan Jackson, field producer for Original Productions, was responsible for convincing the developer, Portland, Ore.-based South Group, to provide access for filming.

Tom Cody, a South Group principal, was originally opposed to the idea of a film crew, but Jackson eventually won him over.

"I like that it focuses on the guys that do the heavy lifting," Cody said. "After all, they're the real heroes."

But it was Jim Stammer, senior superintendent for Howard S. Wright Construction, also based in Portland, Ore., who had to deal

with the camera crew and all the subcontractors working on the Evo project.

"These guys aren't used to having a microphone attached to them and a camera filming them, so it was an adjustment," Stammer said. "But after a short time they forgot the cameras and mikes were even there."

Jackson, who's been with Original Productions for 10 years, producing shows such as "Monster House," said that things went smoothly for the most part. But when something did go wrong, the camera was there to catch it.

Spraying cement

"When they were pouring the pool deck, a cement hose broke and sprayed about six stories of glass wall with cement," Jackson said. "They scrambled around trying to wipe it all off before it dried, but I'm sure that it cost somebody a lot of money."

His flair for capturing men on the razor's edge of catastrophe has earned Beers the nickname of "the guru of grit." His shows are popular because they allow couch potatoes to see what it's like to walk a steel girder 20 stories in the air, weather the elements aboard the pitching deck of a crab boat in the Bering Sea or race across a shifting sheet of Arctic ice in an 18-wheeler.

Beers, who cut his teeth as a producer at

Turner Broadcasting and Paramount syndicated television, calls his style of reality show "docu-soap" because he always works to create an overall story arc while spotlighting the individuals who make up an industry's subculture. Beers, a former actor, often provides the narration.

Audiences regularly top 4 million viewers, breaking ratings records for the shows airing on History Channel, Discovery Channel, Learning Channel and National Geographic Channel.

Thanks to its success on cable, the company is stepping out from cable into network television.

NBC cut a deal during the recent writers' strike to purchase a block of programming from a joint venture between Beers' Original Productions and prominent broadcast industry veterans Gail Berman and Lloyd Braun's BermanBraun. It is what the industry calls a "first-look" deal, meaning that NBC gets the first chance to buy anything the company produces.

Beers produces his docu-soaps for less than \$500,000 an hour, far less than the \$3 million an hour it costs to make a prime-time show such as "ER."

The first show that NBC picked up is called "America's Toughest Jobs," and it will debut on the network in September. That program was produced for about \$600,000 an hour.

The show follows a competition between 13 men and women in a series of blue-collar jobs that are considered America's toughest, including logging and oil rigging. A contestant is eliminated at the end of each episode until their's only one left standing. The winner gets a prize that the producers say will be the combined annual salary of all 13 jobs. They estimate it will be more than \$250,000.

Each episode was filmed on location in cities across the country from Alaska to Texas and Long Beach.

But there's a lot riding on whether "America's Toughest Jobs" can pull in the big audiences that major broadcast networks need, which are three to four times the numbers that Beers has pulled in for his Emmy-winning "Deadliest Catch."

Because ratings have been slipping on hit network reality shows such as "Survivor," Original Productions' deal with NBC could lead to a renaissance for the genre. But if the macho fare doesn't translate to a broader audience, future reality productions could be in jeopardy.

Beers, of course, is betting his network debut is a winner.

"This is the kind of reality TV that people can relate to," he said. "I know that we can pull it off."