Dream come true: Copywriter spends week on 'Baywatch'

BY LARRY PALADINO
STAFF WRITER

It wasn't a speaking role but who cares?

Paul Burneikis, a 24-year-old free-lance copywriter from Southfield, spent a week frolicking on the beach near Santa Monica, Calif., with all those nubile young women and studs from the cast of the wildly popular syndicated TV show "Baywatch."

It was a dream come true for the 1988 Southfield-Lathrup High School graduate, who went on to get a bachelor's degree from Michigan State last year in advertising and theater.

"So far this is the highlight of my life," he said of his adventure over the summer in which he was an extra in the background of scenes from the recently telecast season premiere episode of "Baywatch."

"It was not a speaking role," he said. "You have to be in the Screen Actors Guild for that. But I was on the set for a week and a half. It was a fantastic experience. I had lunch with the cast every day."

In all, Burneikis said, he appeared on camera about a half-dozen times, playing volleyball, walking down the beach, cheering on Rollerblade competitors, and other such parts.

"It wasn't a tremendously demanding acting role," he confessed. "But I'm hoping sometime in the future to obtain some kind of speaking role. But at least now I know some producers and directors and that's not impossible."

"Baywatch" stars David Hasselhoff as the chief lifeguard, Lt. Mitch Buchanon of the Los Angeles County beach patrol, at "Baywatch" Lifeguard Headquarters. His co-star is Pamela Anderson, who plays lifeguard C.J. Parker.

The show is shown locally at 5 p.m. Saturdays on WXON-TV, Channel 20. It is estimated that "Baywatch" has a worldwide audience of one *billion* viewers in more than 140 countries.

How did Burneikis fall into all this?

He's a hero

Actually, it all started when someone else fell — or jumped — into the canal — in Amsterdam during his post-graduation trip to Europe last summer. He rescued the girl, wrote a one-page story on it for a contest sponsored by "Baywatch" and the Red Cross entitled, "All-American Hero Search."

Burneikis' entry was deemed a winner and he was flown to Hollywood, all-expenses paid, for a party in late June with the cast of "Baywatch." It was a weekend package, but "I thought I wanted to roll the dice again, so I skipped my flight home and kept showing up at the set, meeting the directors," he said.

"I tried to convince them I'm a fantastic actor and you should put me on the show. And it worked . . . Hopefully it's not the end of it. I've got my toe in the door of Hollywood and I could possibly get the rest of me in.

"I wasn't a pest, but I wouldn't be ignored, either. They were surprisingly casual about everything. It's not a high-pressure, follow-the-rules type of situation." Burneikis said he was paid between $65 and $100 a day "for frolicking on the beach all day. There are worse careers."

Because of the show's popularity, "I had expected for all the stars to be high strung and snooty," he said. "But the opposite is true. All of a sudden they weren't mega-stars anymore, but cool people to hang out with."

And what of the swimsuit clad women cavorting on the beach?

"They were the most fantastic I've ever seen in my life," he said. "I don't know where they get them, but every extra was a '10' super model. That's why I stretched the trip out as long as I could."

The rescue story, meanwhile, was like a real-life "Baywatch"-style episode.

Burneikis said he was backpacking in Europe and was in Amsterdam. One night he walked down a street of nightclubs and stopped in a restaurant a 2:30 a.m.

"I was writing entries in my journal," he said, "when a girl, about 17, burst in demanding food. She looked haggard and you could see purple needle marks on her arms. The guy comes out from behind the counter and pushes her out the door.

"I could see her crying and walking down the street. I headed back to the youth hostel and then I heard a scream. I ran over to the canal and saw a girl floating face down in the water. It was the same girl. A wave of panic went through my body. There was a six-foot drop off a wall to the canal and there was no way to get down there.

"How would I get down there? My head was spinning. I saw a bike rack a couple houses away. I grabbed a bike and hooked the front wheel on a cleat sticking out of the wall that boats hook up to. Then I climbed down the bike, hooked my legs in it to hang on, pulled her up and rolled her onto her back. My face was bright red with fear.

Life saver

"I hadn't done CPR since Boy Scouts. I was pushing on her stomach and back and trying to get her breathing again. Finally, she coughed up water and gasped for air. It was a crazy experience. After she was breathing normally again, I talked to her, but she was unresponsive. All I found out was that her name was Anna.

"I propped her up and then walked her to the police station. They thanked me and said things like that happen all the time there. And that was about it. But I asked to say goodbye to her one last time. Then she hugged me and said thank you in Dutch. She seemed sad and mixed up, but I think she finally realized what happened.

"I gave her my name and address and asked her to write, but I never heard from her. I hope she's alright."

With that story, if Burneikis doesn't get on "Baywatch" again, maybe at least he could be a lifeguard if he wanted.

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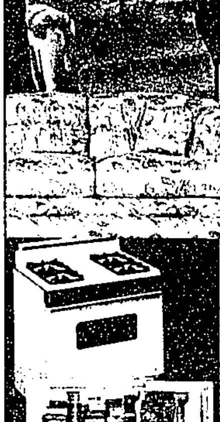

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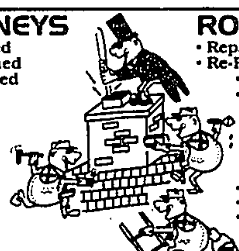

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