

# HARD ROCK MEDICAL LIVES LIFE ON THE EDGE

by Diane Wild

Whether it's an unusual medical school that considers the communities of Northern Ontario to be its campus or an unusual TV show premiering on a provincial broadcaster and based on that university, "innovation comes from the fringes, not from the centre," says *Hard Rock Medical* co-creator Derek Diorio. "Though don't get me wrong — I'd love to fall into the centre."

He and fellow co-creator Smith Corindia would kill for the budget of the average small-budget Canadian series, or the potential ratings that would come from a larger broadcaster, but they also see the positives of being the scrappy outsiders.

"Working under the radar has allowed us to take some risks," says Corindia. "We have a lot more freedom than we would with a bigger broadcaster."

*Hard Rock Medical* premiered on TVO as the provincial broadcaster's first dramatic series, and also aired on APTN and Australia's NITV. It focuses on eight medical students at the fictional Boreal Medical School in Sudbury and uses innovative techniques, such as fantasy sequences or subtitles with characters' thoughts in opposition to their words, to cram a lot of story and character into each low-budget half hour.

"A lot of my career has been outside the system," says the bilingual Diorio, who had been doing a lot of work with TFO, Ontario's French-language broadcaster, partially funded by grants from the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund. At some point he wondered why TVO wasn't doing something similar and approached them with an idea.

"There are two topics they talk about here in the North: rocks and trees — natural resources — and the state of medical care in the North."

Veteran writer Peter Mitchell coined the title and was instrumental in giving the show some shape and direction in those early days.

The real-life Northern Ontario School of Medicine with its innovative "distributed, community-engaged, and socially accountable medical education" became a valuable partner and supporter.

"It was a lot of work convincing the school, hanging out with the students, being in the trenches," Corindia says. "A lot of what they do is hands-on — they throw the students out in the field to learn their trade."

Much of their research involves stepping outside and being immersed in Sudbury life. "We have a medical consultant of course," says Corindia. "She understands the North, she was born and raised here."

"But it all comes from the concept of the school. In order to keep students in the North after they graduate you have to immerse them in the landscape and the culture. In episode seven we go in the bottom of a mine, and we've certainly spun a lot of stories from their curriculum."

"When you're up here you can go to the source, so research isn't a word I would use," Diorio says about their writing process. "We're just story gathering. We go to lunch at *The Fromagerie* and two of our crew members came in who had just come back from a medical simulation — our makeup lady is working as an actor at the medical school. She tells me 'I had HIV.' So now we're talking about doing a simulation story."

Another example? "Charlie was based on the actor who plays him. He's from Sudbury. You walk down the street with Stephane (Paquette) and you bump into five people he knows."

Corindia adds what that means for the medical students, real and fictional: "A lot of the people they bump into in the restaurant, that's going to be their patients next week. They have to separate those worlds."

They create a firm sense of place in the series by using the worlds of the North in different ways. "It's



*Hard Rock Medical has all the expected drama of a normal hospital procedural with the added challenges found in Canada's north.*

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very subtle in the first season but we think about how we can use the North and its folklore and apply it to the show, without being over the top about it."

"How can we get a Sasquatch into it?" Diorio laughs.

Probably not with huge special effects.

Diorio points out that their budget is one half to a third of what a half hour would cost to do in Toronto or Vancouver. He comes from an independent filmmaking background and so is used to smaller crews, multitasking, and no overtime. He directs all the episodes, and he and Corindia write the bulk of the scripts. They start off by talking about episode ideas together, then one or the other

will do an outline and they'll each take a pass, swapping back and forth several times.

For season two, which has an order of eight episodes versus the 13 of season one, their funding has decreased even further. "We have half the money we had last year, and more than half the number of episodes," Corindia says, adding that means the pair will write all of season two.

"And that's not an ego thing," Diorio adds.

He explains the logistics of how to make the show work on the limited budget. "There are a lot of scenes in the show that were not shot as written. I come from an improv background so I made sure we could shoot things within our schedule. I won't