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# Teaming Up with Bonnie Hunt

The one-time Chicago nurse turned actress and television host hit it big in Hollywood, but still cherishes her Midwestern roots.

BY DAWN REISS

It's 40 days until the Cub's April 13 home opener against the Rockies. Bonnie Hunt has been counting down for months. A die-hard Cubs fan, she hasn't missed an opening day at Wrigley Field since 1977.

And Hunt is not going to start now, even though she's busy producing and hosting *The Bonnie Hunt Show* in Culver City, California.

"When I took this job, I told them we had to work the job around opening day," she laughs. "Wrigley Field is a just a smaller, condensed version of what Chicago is all about. Everybody talks to each other, drinks beer, eats a hot dog, and hangs out. It's just a romantic, great place."

The Chicago native loves the tradition so much that she has her crew pass out hot dogs and root beer to members of her talk show audience. Ushers on the set wear Cubs jerseys and hats or warm-up jackets to fend off the cold studio air. When talking about her favorite place, Hunt's voice rings with excitement.

"If I could, I would live in Chicago," says the 47-year-old who grew up the sixth of seven children in a large Catholic family, "I just love it so much."

In high school, Hunt worked part-time as a nurse's aide, later earning a nursing degree and working as an oncology and emergency room nurse at Northwestern University Hospital in the 1980s. It was in the Windy City that Hunt

cofounded an improvisational comedy troupe, An Impulsive Thing, and performed at the famed Second City. While still working as a nurse, Hunt auditioned on her lunch break, winning the role of waitress Sally Dibbs in the award-winning film *Rain Man*. The part launched her acting career that includes roles in box office hits such as *Jerry Maguire*, *Cheaper by the Dozen*, and *The Green Mile*. The two-time Golden Globe- and Emmy Award-nominated actress also has directed movies—the romantic comedy *Return to Me*, starring David Duchovny and Minnie Driver—and voiced animated movies including *A Bug's Life*, *Monsters, Inc.*, and *Cars*, which she helped write.

Hunt is a passionate fund-raiser who, through ventures such as her show's "Bonnie's Basement," has raised money for The Robert H. Lurie Comprehensive Cancer Center of Northwestern University and the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation for spinal cord injury research.

The *Post* caught up with daytime television's most down-to-earth and approachable host.

**SEP:** Why are you so passionate about your hometown?

**Hunt:** Chicago is a big part of who I am. Being in the city helps you to develop lifelong skills. (Laughing) The weather alone in Chicago teaches you teamwork. Everybody has to shovel their cars out to get back on the road

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*The Bonnie Hunt Show*, which premiered in September 2008 and is scheduled for another season, showcases Hunt's wit and banter with popular guests such as NBC's Brian Williams on a decidedly retro set—a tribute to Dean Martin and to her fascination with early talk shows.

**"I was born into a team—the sixth of seven children. As a nurse at the hospital, it was all about teamwork. At the end of the day, working together is what life is all about."**



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or you wait for the buses. You earn spring. When it turns 40 degrees in Chicago, everyone has shorts on. Out here in L.A., it hits 40 degrees and everyone has a parka on. Chicago has always felt like a giant Mayberry to me. It's all about remembering where you came from and the strength that it gives you. Sometimes life gets cloudy, and remembering your roots keeps everything in perspective, especially when you are trying to survive in a self-obsessed industry.

**SEP: Were you always a Cubs fan, and what's it like to go to games now?**

**Hunt:** I grew up with scrapbooks of the Cubs. It was part of the family tradition. When I moved out of my parents' house, I had to get reception to Chicago's radio station WGN. Just having the sound of a ball game in the background is calming. It's the soundtrack of our lives.

My brother Tom and the guys we grew up with from the old neighborhood always go. Tommy gets the tickets, and we usually sit behind third base. I always end up looking like Neapolitan ice cream—one arm tan, the other white, and I'm mostly bright red. Going to the ball game is just fun. I was born into a team—the sixth of seven children. As a nurse at the hospital, it was all about teamwork. Even at Second City, making an audience laugh and participate is about teamwork. At the end of the day, working together is what life is all about.

**SEP: You are so approachable and candid. Is there something people might not know about you?**

**Hunt:** (Laughs) Most people know just about everything about me. I do love gardening—it's one of my favorite pastimes. I have an herb garden, but I also plant a traditional spring garden, like I'm in Chicago, even though everything grows year-round here in L.A. I plant irises, hyacinths, and lots of tulips. It's like an orchestra when they bloom a couple of weeks apart from each other.

**SEP: You have your own personal style as**

a TV host, but did others influence you?

**Hunt:** I learned a lot from Johnny [Carson], from how to welcome a guest to a show to respecting who they are and their story. He always did that. There was nothing desperate or anxious about him. That is sometimes a lost art in television. David [Letterman] has always been so supportive and encouraging to me. He's had me on his show and has been a business partner. He's a friend—someone I call if I need advice or to bounce an idea off someone. Johnny and David knew and understood me. We are all from the Midwest. With that comes a certain sensibility and humor. We are all grateful for the opportunities, and it's been a great honor to work with both of them.

**SEP:** Why did you decide to bring your mom, Alice, on your show for the "Ask Alice" segment?

**Hunt:** I've talked about my mom, like David Letterman has, for so many years. Everyone can relate to a mom. I'm lucky to still have my mom in my life. I just want to share her with everybody. She is still very much the same mom I had when I was 7 years old. She genuinely loves and cares about people and is very funny, which is why I have quite a sense of humor.

**SEP:** How did you make the transition from nursing to acting?

**Hunt:** It was a hobby. Growing up in my neighborhood, I didn't really think it would be possible to act, but my dad always told us to go for our dreams. I was really lucky to be a nurse first, because it's given me the gift of perspective. One of my patients told me, "When are you going to go out to L.A.?" I said, "I'm not going to, because then I'd fail and have to come back and explain myself." He told me, "Bonnie, facing the end of my own life and one of my biggest regrets is not going out and failing a few times." So he made me promise I would. And I've failed many times, but I've learned from them. You always learn more from your failures than successes. ❀