

SCREEN SCENE *Modern Family* creator Steve Levitan, photographed at Disney-ABC Television Group's summer press tour

Family Man

Chicago native and *Modern Family* co-creator Steve Levitan dishes on spending his days with the craziest family on the small screen. | *By Jessica Radloff* |

The 15 million viewers who tune in to ABC's *Modern Family* every Wednesday have one person to thank: Rob Petrie, *The Dick Van Dyke Show's* lovable comedy writer who inspired a young Evanston kid named Steve Levitan to follow his dreams. Fast forward 40 years and Levitan, 49, the co-creator and executive producer of *Modern Family*, is living the ultimate Hollywood success story; his show earned a sitcom-leading 17 nominations for this month's Emmy Awards. We caught up with Levitan to talk Phil, report cards and why he'll be spending a lot more time in Chicago.

(LEVITAN'S CHICAGO FAVORITES)

[Twin Anchors](#) is an old stomping ground... I always have a hot dog at [The Wieners Circle](#) and, of course, [Lou Malnati's](#) for pizza... I love a great [walk down Michigan Avenue](#), the [architecture boat tour](#) and the [Art Institute](#). Plus, [riding the El](#) with my dad to a [Cubs game](#) brings me back to my youth.

With the third season about to begin [Sept. 21], is it harder to come up with new stories, or easier now that the show is such a well-oiled machine? What becomes easier is that we have a better handle on what works, but oftentimes we'll be on a story and [say], 'You know, this feels too much like that one we did.' [That's] the hardest part—it's like doing a crossword puzzle while doing a Rubik's Cube eight hours a day.

This is one of the toughest businesses, based on the amount of rejection alone. What inspired you? I grew up watching *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, where Rob Petrie was a comedy writer. That always seemed like a wonderful way to make a living, but it didn't seem very real because I didn't know anybody who did it. This is my third or fourth career—I actually started in news, and then advertising. Everything I did involved writing, but it kept getting more creative each time, sort of like letting go of real life a bit and taking a giant leap of faith over time.

Which Modern Family character are you most like? Part of me always says I'm Phil Dunphy and part of me is Claire Dunphy [laughs] because I have Phil's goofiness and his love of gadgetry. A lot of what he goes through, I've gone through. But at the same time, there's a lot of Claire's neuroses in me, [like her] tendency to overthink [laughs].

Congratulations are also in order to your daughter, who got accepted into Northwestern. Yep! I'll be coming back to Chicago more [often]. We're really excited.

Any chance you'll have Haley Dunphy shock everyone and get into Northwestern, too? Then you could take the show on location to Chicago. Haven't thought about that one... seems like a stretch! Especially with what we now know about Northwestern [laughs]... though I'd love to work Chicago [into a future episode].

Would you say what you're doing now is a fantasy? Yeah, I would. I'd say it's my dream come true, but who could have predicted that? By the way, no one would have predicted that from my report cards. I was a distracted student. I excelled in the things I was interested in and I was terrible in the things that I had no interest in. Until I got into things that I wanted to study, then all of a sudden I was a straight-A student, but before that it was like, 'Oh, I hate this class, so screw that!' ■