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John O'Leary: Setting The World (And SLU) on Fire

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11–14 minutes

Last week, Saint Louis University served as the set for a new up-and-coming film releasing sometime around Thanksgiving of 2024. With flashing cameras, film tents across West Pine and opportunities to act as extras in scenes, students could not help but feel excited and intrigued by this fascinating project on campus.

The filming is not just for any story, but the life-changing and inspiring story of SLU alumni and native Missourian, John O'Leary. The film recounts O'Leary's journey from being a burn victim to becoming a renowned motivational speaker and best-selling author. With its humble origins, the film hopes to motivate and inspire viewers to transform their lives and live a life "on fire."

When O'Leary was nine years old, he made the mistake of playing with fire and gasoline in his family's garage. This chemical reaction caused an instant explosion, burning over 100% of O'Leary's body and leaving him. O'Leary's doctors said he only had a 1% chance of survival, but O'Leary did not let those odds win. He survived and dedicated his life to showing others how to triumph over tragedy and maintain a positive mindset in the midst of adversity.

Since then, O'Leary refused to let the tragedies of his past define him and through motivational speeches centering on self-improvement, safety and faith, he inspires audiences to conquer adversity and recognize the intrinsic value of their life. Employing storytelling, humor and authenticity, O'Leary conveys his message that people choose their mindset and can transform the world by first transforming themselves.

Not only is O'Leary a renowned motivational speaker, but he is also the best-selling author of [“On Fire: 7 Choices to Ignite a Radically Inspired Life,”](#) seen on best-seller lists for USA Today, Amazon and Publisher Weekly.” His self-help book teaches the reader a seven-step plan for “living a life on fire, full of hope and possibility.”

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O'Leary's dedication to inspiring others does not stop there, he is also the host of an award-winning podcast, [“Live Inspired,”](#) airing Mondays and Thursdays. On Mondays, O'Leary shares words of encouragement for listeners to start their week with a positive mindset. On Thursdays, O'Leary interviews different guest speakers to learn about their successes, failures and perspectives.

Guests have included Kwame Alexander, author of “The Crossover,” and Willie Robertson, star of “Duck Dynasty.” Like O’Leary’s book, the goal of his weekly podcast is to encourage others to live a life “on fire.”

Seven years after its publication, O’Leary’s story of determination is now being made into a feature film, named after his book, “On Fire.” The film, shot in Missouri, is one of the first productions to use Missouri’s new production tax credit, which creates incentives for filmmakers and producers to film in Missouri as it reduces the costs and taxes production companies pay.

Co-producer, Toni Farina, a native Missourian, expressed her excitement over Missouri’s new tax credit. “I am so thrilled that the governor [Mike Parson] finally passed this law that allows us to come and film in this beautiful state of ours,” said Farina. Prior to the new tax credit production policy in Missouri, California and New York dominated the U.S. cinematic landscape because of their lenient tax production laws. Hopefully, with this new policy in Missouri, people can expect more creative cinematic projects in the state.

Filming began in Maplewood, MO, with a bowling scene at Saratoga Lanes, where O’Leary hung out with his friends in college, and has since moved to St. Louis, where O’Leary spent his childhood, adolescence and college life. Over the next few weeks, SLU will be their primary filming spot in addition to the sites and places that O’Leary visited and spent time, such as The Arch, Busch Stadium and Missouri State Penitentiary.

By filming on-site instead of in Los Angeles, directors and producers hope to retain the authenticity of the story and create a

more vivid depiction of O'Leary's life and experiences. Even with all his travel for speeches and events, O'Leary chose to stay in St. Louis with his wife and children. In an interview with [NBC](#), J. Todd Harris, one of the film's producers, expressed how fortunate they are to be able to film in these locations.

“[St. Louis] was the perfect place to shoot this movie. You do want to shoot a movie where it was set if you can. You don't have to fake Busch Stadium. You don't have to fake the Arch. You don't have to fake SLU,” said Harris.

O'Leary graduated from The John Cook School of Business, now the Richard A. Chaifetz School of Business, with his bachelor's in finance and his continuing professional education certificate in accounting. O'Leary explained that SLU is a very impactful part of his life.

“My father went to SLU, my brother went to school here, I graduated from SLU, and this is also where I met my wife,” said O'Leary.

O'Leary did not always know he was going to be a public speaker. Post-graduation, O'Leary worked at JOL Development, a company that leases and renovates residential and commercial properties. Initially, O'Leary was hesitant to public speaking, but one day a girl scout asked him to give a speech at her school. O'Leary obliged and after his speech schools, companies and organizations from across the country began to ask O'Leary to share his story.

In May of 2023, he gave the [spring commencement address](#). During his address, O'Leary recounted his harrowing experience with fire and how he was able to overcome this adversity in his life. O'Leary reaffirmed his belief that every life is important and

matters.

“Whether they’re in the front row or the last row, their life matters.”

He stated during the address.

Director of the film, Sean McNamara, originally directed for Disney Channel, with shows and movies such as “Even Stevens,” “That’s So Raven,” “Phil of The Future,” “Jessie,” “The Suite Life of Zack and Cody Movie,” and the “Jonas Brothers” TV show. However, in more recent years, he transitioned to directing inspirational movies, such as “Soul Surfer,” “Miracle Season,” and “Spare Parts.”

“I think it just evolved from making inspirational comedies to inspirational dramas, and [On Fire] is kind of a ‘dramedy,’” said McNamara.

“

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— Sean McNamara

McNamara explained the impact of O’Leary’s story on him and why he chose to direct the movie. “John O’Leary’s story just totally blew me away. It’s like chicken noodle soup for the soul. We need to watch movies like this and have inspiring role models. It’s really important.”

The film features a wide variety of talent apart from the SLU students invited to be extras in many scenes. Joel Courtney (“The Kissing Booth”) stars as a young O’Leary during his years at SLU while John Corbett (“My Big Fat Greek Wedding” and “Sex and The City”) stars as O’Leary’s father. William H. Macy

(“Shameless”) also stars as Jack Buck, the former sportscaster for the St. Louis Cardinals.

During his childhood, Jack Buck, announcer for the St. Louis Cardinals from 1961 to 2001, acted as a role model and mentor for O'Leary. While O'Leary was hospitalized, he lost his ability to see, move or talk. As a result, he relied on his sense of sound to understand what was going on around him. More specifically, he relied on Jack Buck's voice so that he could still watch his favorite baseball team, the St. Louis Cardinals. O'Leary expressed his admiration for Jack Buck in an interview with [“The Athletic.”](#)

“In this community [St. Louis, MO], the only thing outside of your mom and dad's voice you'd rather hear is the gravelly voice of Jack Buck if you were a Cardinals fan in the 1980s,” O'Leary said.

During his hospitalization, Buck visited O'Leary, promising to take O'Leary to the ballpark when he was physically able. After a five-month-long intensive treatment for O'Leary's burn wounds, the young boy went to Busch Stadium, met the St. Louis Cardinals and received a signed baseball from Ozzie Smith, shortstop for the Cardinals.

After his visit, Buck told O'Leary that he better write a thank you letter if he wanted a second baseball. O'Leary's physical therapist had been trying to encourage O'Leary to write for months and Buck's playful words moved O'Leary to pick up a pen again and try to start writing. Since O'Leary's fingers were amputated, writing proved to be a difficult task at first. However, Buck's encouragement helped O'Leary slowly regain this ability as he began to practice more consistently.

To this day, O'Leary continues to appreciate all of Buck's support.

In his 2018 [keynote speech](#), “How John Buck Changed My Life,” O’Leary detailed the positive impact one person can have on someone’s life and how a small act of kindness can go a long way.

O’Leary expressed how surreal the experience of watching someone embody and play a younger version of himself is. “[It is] shocking and it almost feels wrong. And yet, as we’re going through the process, it’s humbling and the characters portray us so well and so passionately and so brilliantly,” said O’Leary.

Throughout production, the directors and producers have made an effort to stay true to the source material by getting to know O’Leary in his own space, St. Louis, and allowing him to be heavily involved in the creative process as an associate producer of the film.

“I started by reading the script, and then I read his book, and then I listened to his book, and I’ve been hanging out with John O’Leary for the past year, just hanging out in St. Louis and hanging out with his family,” said McNamara.

Executive producer, Terry Schnuk, expressed similar sentiments. “We are very intent on trying to be as accurate as possible to the source material, especially since we are dealing with someone’s real life, as we do in this case. [McNamara] has been very particular about that,” Schnuk said. “We’ve been very lucky in that John O’Leary grew up in St. Louis so we’ve been able to use a lot of the types of venues he would have been connected to.”

As an associate producer, O’Leary is able to clarify events of his past and ensure that the events of the movie reflect the realities of his life. O’Leary is often present at shooting and an active member

of creative discussions.

When asked about what he contributes to the filming process, O'Leary said "joy." He said, "I have the ability to keep these folks grounded in the heart of what we're doing here, which is to tell a story of love and life and impact," said O'Leary.

“

The main hero is all the people who showed up and served him along the way.”

— John O'Leary

O'Leary explained his personal intentions for the film. “[I’m] making sure that people recognize that the main hero is not John. The main hero is all the people who showed up and served him along the way.”

O'Leary's story is an example of the power of transformation. Sometimes all it takes is a change of mindset and perspective. With the release of "On Fire," O'Leary and the creative team hope to inspire viewers to initiate change and growth in their lives while reminding viewers about the importance of their life and their potential to become the person they want to be. In other words, it is all about how to live your life "on fire."