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'On Fire,' a movie following the life of local burn survivor John O'Leary, to be filmed in St. Louis

Connie Mitchell

In July, 2023, Missouri Gov. Mike Parson signed a bill giving production companies a 20 percent tax rebate when filming in the state, including 5 to 10 percent additional rebates if specific filming criteria are met. Already, the new law is bringing the film business to St. Louis. “We are thrilled that the governor has signed the bill into law, and we will be able to film the entire project in St. Louis,” says Linda Huntington of Radically Inspired Films.



Photo courtesy of John O'Leary

Radically Inspired Films’ newest venture, “On Fire,” is a biopic about John O’Leary, a St. Louis resident, motivational speaker, podcaster and author of “On Fire: The 7 Choices to Ignite a Radically Inspired Life.” Huntington serves as the film’s executive producer. She points out that even with the current Screen Actors Guild and Writers Guild of

America strikes, actors will still be able to work on independent film projects like “On Fire” when the SAG grants a waiver for the project.

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“Once we are completely cast, we are hoping to proceed with our plan to shoot in early fall,” Huntington says. “We should produce a completed film by the end of the year.” Filming in St. Louis is expected to take about four weeks.



Photo of John O'Leary and sons with "On Fire" director Sean MacNamara courtesy of O'Leary

St. Louis Filmworks, a local film advocacy nonprofit committed to building a sustainable and profitable filmmaking ecosystem for emerging storytellers in St. Louis, is assisting with the philanthropic fundraising efforts for “On Fire.” The organization is also making key connections to crew, production resources and other local services to ensure that production is successful. “‘On Fire’ is the fifth project we’ve sponsored this year through our new fiscal sponsorship program,” says Mary Kay Sheets, co-founder of St. Louis Film Works. “We will be launching a grant program this fall and a writer’s competition in the spring, so the timing of

this new tax incentive couldn't be better.”

O'Leary's story centers on his recovery from severe burns he suffered as a 9-year-old when he ignited an explosive gasoline fire in his garage. He spent five months in the hospital and endured years of follow-up surgeries and physical therapy. As an adult, O'Leary began sharing his story as a motivational speaker. He published “On Fire” in 2016 and a second book, “In Awe: Rediscover Your Childlike Wonder to Unleash Inspiration, Meaning and Joy,” in 2020.

“Audiences might think, as a burn survivor, that I'd only talk about my journey. After hearing my message, they discover that the story is really about gratitude for the gift of life and harnessing our potential to elevate others,” O'Leary says. Huntington heard O'Leary deliver this message at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas and asked O'Leary if he would consider turning the story into a movie. “After telling her that many people had suggested it, she asked for my permission to move forward,” he says. “She began the process, built a team, hired a scriptwriter, attracted a world-class director [Sean McNamara], secured funding and got us to the exciting point where we are today.”

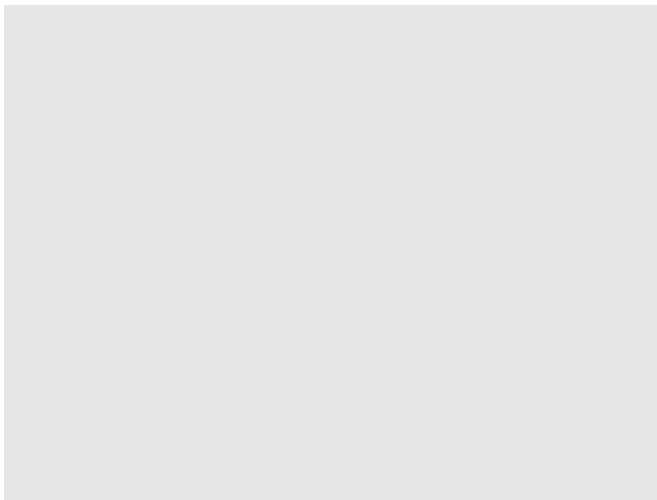


Image courtesy of Radically Inspired Films

The film will follow O'Leary's story of struggles, recovery and support as he “moved through shame and regret to embracing fully the scars and the gift of life.” Among the unexpected help he received during recovery, former St. Louis Cardinals announcer Jack Buck heard of O'Leary's condition and visited him in the hospital, encouraging him to fight for survival.

After six months of recovery, O'Leary was honored with a special day at Busch Stadium.

O'Leary is still getting used to the idea of his life story on film. "After enduring burns to my entire body, my dream was not one day to share the story or celebrate the scars – it was to fit in and be ordinary," he says. "It is utterly surreal to imagine that a story I spent decades trying to hide from has moved as many lives as it has and is being transformed into a traditional, full-length, Hollywood movie.

"I love that there is a tragic story, a redemptive story, a Cardinals baseball story, a family story and a love story all folded into one powerful story of life," he says. "And at a time of so much divisiveness, cynicism and negativity, I love that the movie 'On Fire' celebrates what happens when a community comes together, when personal imperfections are embraced and when we allow the fear of who we wish we were to finally give way to the gift of all we already are."

John O'Leary, johnolearyinspires.com/speaking

St. Louis Filmworks, stlouisfilmworks.org

Radically Inspired Films, radicallyinspired.com

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