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On Fire For Good: The power of saying yes

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8–10 minutes

John O’Leary, Jack Buck, William H. Macy – some of those names may be familiar to you. After all, Jack Buck is a St. Louis legend, not only as the Cardinals’ longtime broadcaster but as a good man with a heart for the community. William H. Macy, as you probably know, is a critically acclaimed actor. John O’Leary is a motivational speaker, author and podcaster. But if O’Leary’s name is unfamiliar to you, he’s OK with that. While his story is remarkable, he’s quick to tell you that he’s just an ordinary man – a husband, father, brother, son. Oh, and a baseball enthusiast.

That’s where these three names and stories become intertwined.

When O’Leary was 9, a tragic accident at his parent’s home in Town & Country left him burned on 100% of his body. He was expected to die. But his mother told him if he wanted to live he would have to fight – and someone, O’Leary doesn’t know who, told Buck that a badly burned boy, a baseball fan, was in the hospital fighting 1% odds to survive.

Buck showed up and he kept showing up.

“What Jack Buck did so brilliantly was, when presented with an

opportunity to make a difference, he said yes, he showed up, he came back and he brought friends,” O’Leary said of Buck’s involvement in his life. That involvement included sending Red Schoendienst, Ozzie Smith, Andy Van Slyke, football coach Gene Stallings and St. Louis Blues forward Gino Cavallini to the hospital to encourage O’Leary. Later, Buck and his friends motivated O’Leary to learn how to write despite the loss of his fingers on both hands. The two became lifelong friends.

But John never intended to share their story. He lived. Life went on. Then, his parents wrote a book called “Overwhelming Odds.” It was meant as a gift for family and friends who had supported the O’Learys during their long journey of healing. But one person told another person, and soon it was O’Leary’s turn to say yes.

He was asked to share his story with a third-grade Girl Scout troop. There were only three Scouts in the audience, but that led to another, larger group. And so it went. With the help of friends, O’Leary continued to show up, and today his Live Inspired team he says has “gone on to influence 2,600 organizations around the world, millions and millions of people.”

Last year, O’Leary did something he never dreamed he would do. He wrote a letter to Macy asking the actor to portray Buck in a movie based on O’Leary’s life. It was Macy’s turn to say yes.

The movie, titled “On Fire,” was filmed earlier this year at locations throughout St. Louis. Its release will not be until next fall at the earliest, or more likely next spring. However, sometime this year, O’Leary will release a podcast he recorded with Macy in the actor’s home. He’s already teased it on Facebook. In that post, he eludes to why Macy was such a good choice to portray Buck.

“... as we sat around his kitchen island and before even hitting record on the podcast, we had already received a masterclass in what makes William H. Macy one of the most beloved actors in the business: his genuine care for others, his humility regarding the gifts he has received, his passion for the work he does, and his joyful gratitude for the family he has and the life he leads,” O’Leary wrote.

O’Leary shared how the first thing Macy did after ushering O’Leary, his wife, Beth, and son Jack into his home, was to brew a pot of tea.

“In asking my son how he takes his tea, he learned Jack had never had a cup,” O’Leary wrote. “Playfully acting aghast that Jack had never enjoyed tea, Bill insisted he’d make it his favorite way: with a little maple syrup and fresh orange squeezed into it.”

These are the stories O’Leary loves to share – ones that illustrate the simple beauty of connection, of little actions that ignite sparks that lead people to strive to be the best version of themselves.

The power of people

On Saturday, Nov. 25, 2023, at an event to launch O’Leary’s newest effort, On Fire For Good, he said he received “500 stunning stories of individuals who people believe personify someone who is on fire for good.”

“In our terminology, it means they’re grateful for the gift of their life, they’re joyful in every engagement, and they’re for their community,” O’Leary said.

Now, his goal is to share those stories and, in so doing, change the narrative that too often gets associated with life today – that

things are bad and the world is broken. Instead, he wants to shine a light on people who are identifying what is bad and broken, moving toward it, and redeeming it in small and mighty ways.

“What we’re trying to create is a movement ... where we get to celebrate people in the community who are doing good work. These overlooked and unsung heroes who quietly are going about work, or charity, or their own personal walk in ways that are elevating the lives of people around them,” OLeary explained. “Turns out, Jack Buck isn’t the only good person to have ever lived in St. Louis.”

Oleary 4.jpg

O’Leary (right) suffered burns on 100% of his body at age 9. Now, at 47, he is an author and motivational speaker. (Photo courtesy of Patrick Barry)

The making of a movie

In a very real way, it was one person inspiring another and a few

more people saying yes that sparked the making of the “On Fire” movie.

According to O’Leary, a woman approached him after a speaking engagement and asked if he had ever considered turning his life story into a movie. He said others had, but he had not. She asked if she could try, and he said yes. A year later, they met again. She told him she had found a screenwriter and begun the process of raising funds.

“So Gregory Poirier writes this beautiful screenplay, but still it’s like, ‘Now what?’ It took six years, and ultimately an act of the governor to allow movies to be made in Missouri and get a tax rebate packet – the Motion Media Production Tax Credit,” O’Leary said. “So then ‘On Fire’ can be made right here in our own backyard.”

But movies cost money.

“We still had to raise millions and millions of dollars. This is where the St. Louis community stepped in, and check by check, dollar by dollar, they invested in this film,” John said.

They said yes.

“Now, we were able to recruit talent. So we started with our main talent and landed William H. Macy ... he’s a perfect fit for Jack Buck,” O’Leary said. “He’s humble, he’s fun, he’s spirited ... he’s outstanding.”

Three men. Three opportunities to say yes. Millions of lives elevated by the experience. O’Leary says that’s what it means to live on fire and it’s happening all around us.

Oleary 2.jpg

John O’Leary poses next to his chair on set of “On Fire.” (Photo courtesy of Patrick Barry)

“To a person, whether it’s the director, the associate director, the crew of 200 or the 49 actors, including William H. Macy, walked onto set assuming this would be just another movie and they all walked off saying that this was unlike anything else they’d ever

participated in. There's a lot of reasons for that," O'Leary said.

"The love, community, faithfulness and spirit that was invested into a little boy who was dying 36 years ago ... is the same love, faithfulness, generosity and spirit that was invested into these individuals when they arrived on set. That saved my life 36 years ago, but I think it elevates our lives today and I think it's so cool that they felt it."

That's the power of saying yes.