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FEATURED

"On Fire"

Film shot in St. Louis tells inspirational life story of John O'Leary, who suffered near-fatal burns as a child

Julie Brown Patton

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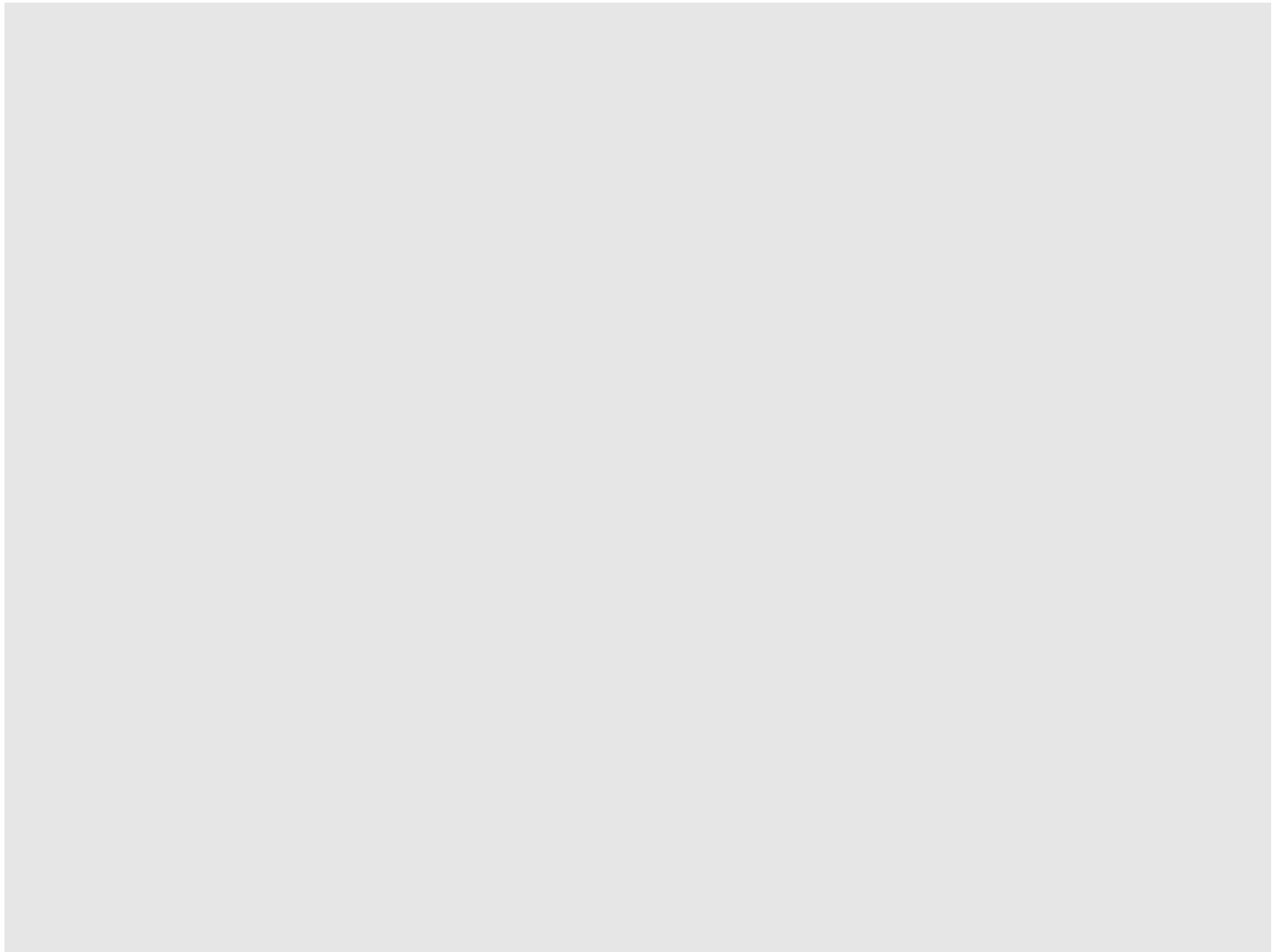
A production crew on the parking lot of EdgeWild Restaurant & Winery in Chesterfield on Nov. 16 films a scene for "On Fire." | **photo by Julie Brown Patton**

Receptivity is ablaze to "On Fire," a movie being filmed locally and around St. Louis about Webster Groves motivational speaker John O'Leary's can-do messages learned through his near-death experience in a fire.

Years of adversity from surviving and overcoming the near-fatal burns over O'Leary's entire body when he was 9 years old fuel the plot of "On Fire." The screenplay transitions from O'Leary as a child to an adult, and is slated to be released in November 2024.

"It is happening, but it's been a seven-year journey with constant challenges and significant setbacks. From financing to filming, every part of this has been a wild ride," reflected O'Leary, 46, who's now delighting in the milestone with his wife, Beth, and their four children Jack, Patrick, Henry and Grace.

Based on O'Leary's 2016 best-selling, self-help book, "On Fire: 7 Choices To Ignite A Radically Inspired Life," the film was adapted for the screen by Gregory Poirier.



John O'Leary on set at EdgeWild Restaurant & Winery in Chesterfield. | **photo by Julie Brown Patton**

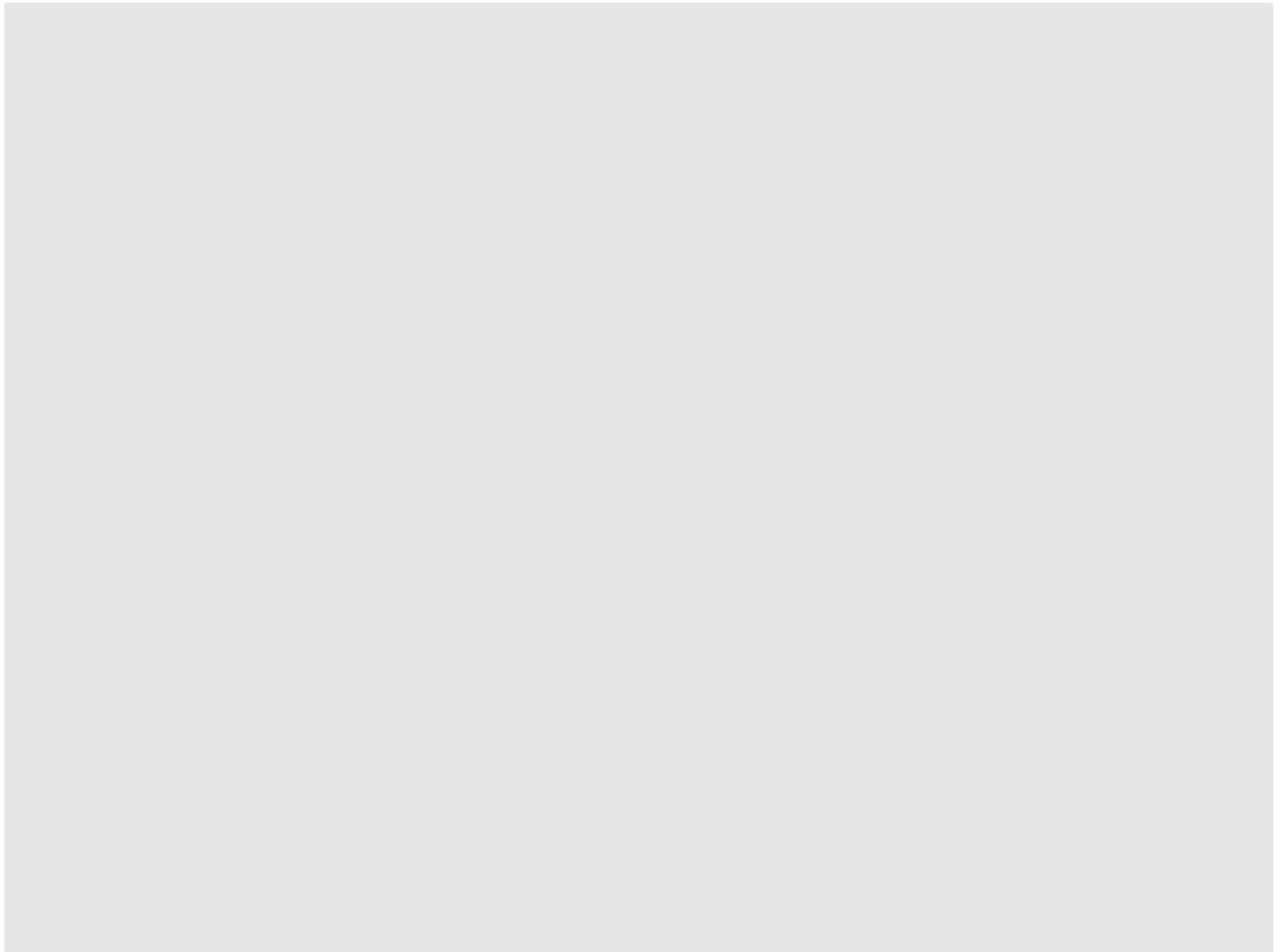
It picks up with a young O'Leary who's given virtually no chance of survival after being burned in a harrowing accidental fire at his family's home. In his fight to live and show what's possible, O'Leary leaned on his family, his faith and others in St. Louis, including legendary St. Louis Cardinals announcer Jack Buck.

"This isn't a story just about a young boy who was burned. In fact, it's more of a community story, about ordinary citizens who stepped forward to help in truthfully miraculous ways," said O'Leary, who lives in Webster Groves and works in Kirkwood. "It's really about the best of ourselves, and how terrific it is when people make positive differences."

Gigantic Local Wins

Original plans called for the majority of the film to be shot in Vancouver and some in Los Angeles, Chicago or Atlanta, with only a sliver to be shot in St. Louis, said the film's executive producer and Clayton resident Terry Schnuck, also a family member of the Schnucks grocery store chain.

Schnuck said film director Sean McNamara visited the Gateway City to meet O'Leary and "fell in love with St. Louis," which led to placing the action smack in the heart of the Midwest.



John O'Leary on set at EdgeWild Restaurant & Winery in Chesterfield. | **photo by Julie Brown Patton**

"This is not just a story about a kid facing overwhelming odds. It's a love story, over John's different stages of life," said Schnuck, who said he was first impressed with O'Leary when he previously heard him speak to a management team.

"We think we're going to change other people's lives with what the movie demonstrates," Schnuck added.

Filming took place, using voluminous local talent and services, at O'Leary's former favorite spots, including his parents' home and nearby locations in the Des Peres/Town & Country area, Saratoga Lanes in Maplewood, Manchester, Busch Stadium, St. Louis University, Chesterfield, the Shrine of St. Joseph Catholic Church and even the Missouri State Penitentiary in Jefferson City.

O'Leary's life-changing experience of when he accidentally caught himself on fire was recreated in the same Town and Country home where it happened in the late 1980s, in which his parents, Susan and Dennis O'Leary, still live.

"I was in my garage playing with matches and gasoline, just like I'd seen older boys do. A fire exploded, consuming my garage, sending me flying back against the wall and turning my whole world upside down," O'Leary recalled.

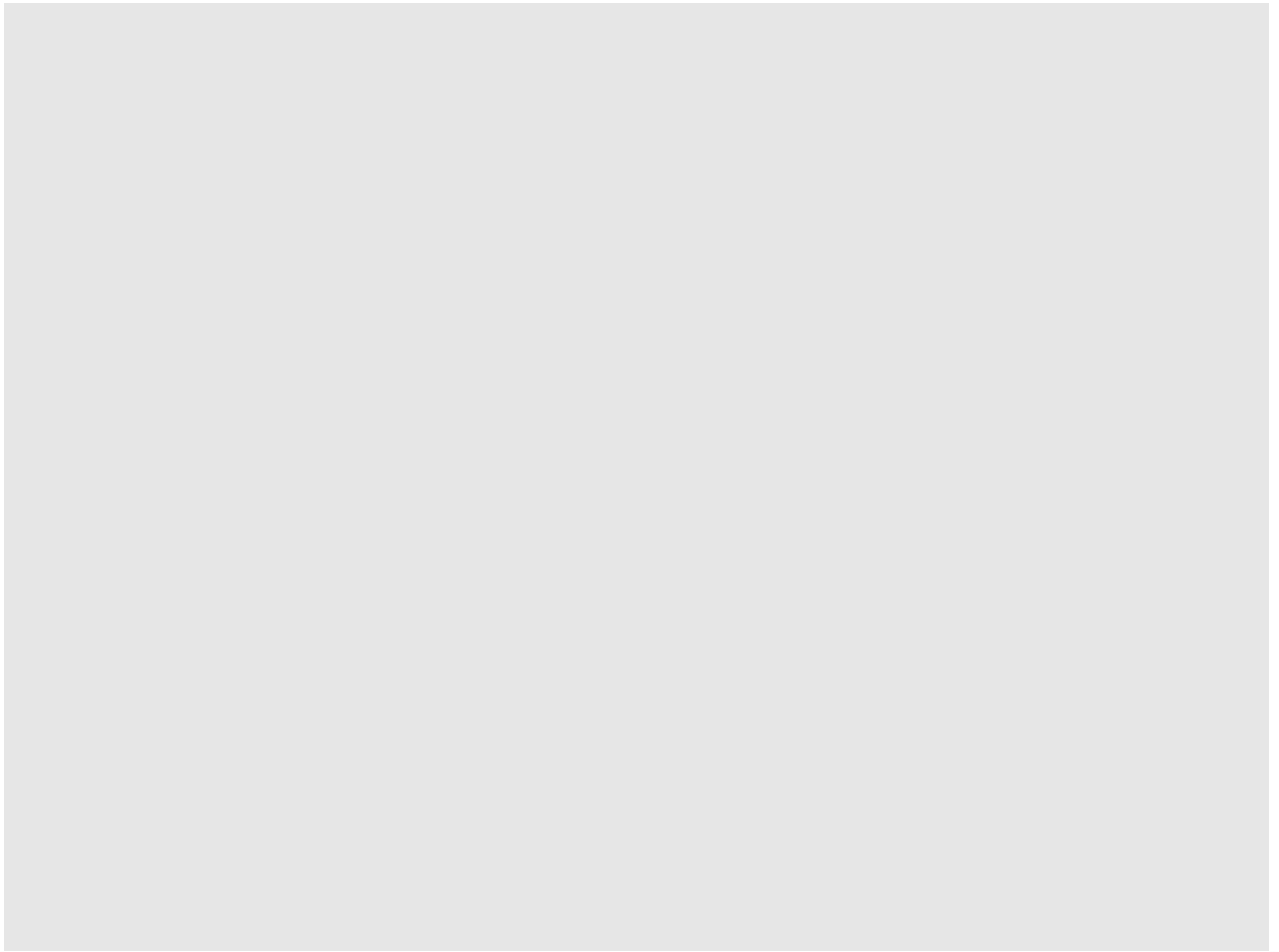
O'Leary said doctors gave him a 1% chance to live.

"Through all the pain, I remember hearing my mom's voice and asking her if I would be OK," he said. "My mom had the courage not to comfort me with a lie, but to instead ask: 'John, do you want to die? It's your choice, not mine.'"

"I thought for a moment and answered: 'Mom, I don't want to die. I want to live,'" he added.



The life story of John O'Leary is the subject of a new movie being filmed at locations throughout the St. Louis area. |
photo by Julie Brown Patton



John O'Leary on set at EdgeWild Restaurant & Winery in Chesterfield. | **photo by Julie Brown Patton**

O'Leary then spent five months in the hospital, endured dozens of surgeries and underwent years of physical therapy. Eventually, his parents wrote a book in 2008 titled "Overwhelming Odds," which chronicled their family's experience after the accident.

They originally printed only 100 copies to give to family and friends who supported them during their son's long journey of healing. However, the book's recipients then told their friends and families about its message of hope, leading to new requests, so more had to be printed. Nearly 100,000 copies of the book have now been sold.

O'Leary said his mother played a crucial role in his recovery.

"I was a little boy in a wheelchair on a morphine drip with no fingers, and yet, when I came home that first night, she made me pick up a fork and try to eat ... a skill I assumed was gone," he said. "Two days later, she had a piano teacher teaching me piano again. My mom wanted to

remind me there was nothing in life that I could not do, if I believed in fact I could."

Susan O'Leary said reliving the range of those experiences during the recent filming of the movie about her son's life was somewhat surreal.

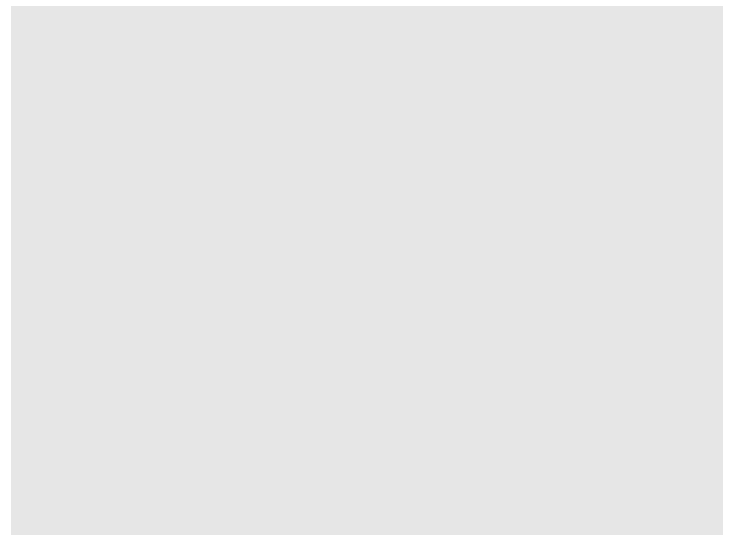
"We moved out of our house for a bit because we had a crew of 75 or 80 people there for filming. They all had assignments and knew where to go. It was very interesting to watch the process," she described.

Susan O'Leary said a couple of local fire engine teams also came to her residence on Nov. 14 to mimic when they responded to the then-emergency call for her young, injured son. The firefighters who arrived to the O'Leary's burning house 36 years ago returned to the house five months later as part of a large gathering welcoming John O'Leary to his rebuilt home while a marching band played "Don't Stop Believing."

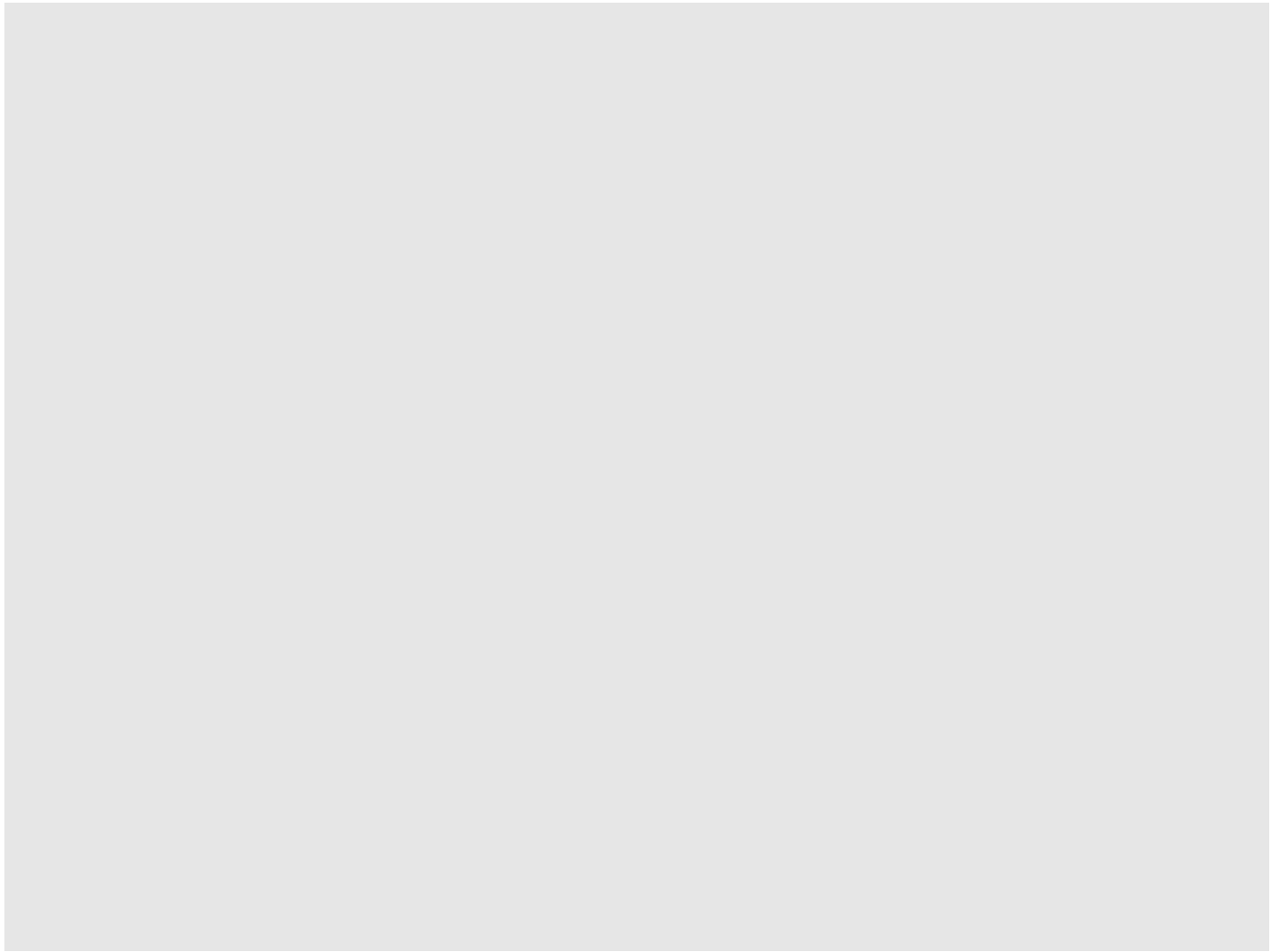
Parkway North High School marching band members performed the same song for the recreation of the scene in the upcoming film. Firefighters Tim Geiss and David Kaiser, both longtime friends of O'Leary, are featured in the film as firefighters. It was another special moment for O'Leary, as Kaiser was one of his classmates at the time he was burned and was at his house the day he came home 36 years ago.

O'Leary, who also hosts a podcast called "Live Inspired," and often explains he doesn't consider himself a burn victim, said it's redemptive that something so tragic in 1987 is now being shared to celebrate the very best of life.

"What's also a fun fact is that when we filmed the wedding scene at St. Joseph's from mine and Beth's wedding, the people attending it in the film are the same family and friends who attended our real wedding years ago," he said.



A production crew on the parking lot of EdgeWild Restaurant & Winery in Chesterfield on Nov. 16 films a scene for "On Fire." | photo by Julie Brown Patton



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Movie Launches Tax Savings Precedent

"On Fire" is the first film to leverage Missouri's reinstated tax credit, which provides filmmakers with 20% tax credit based on the total funds they spend in the state for qualifying expenses. Tax credits for such expenses under previous law expired on Nov. 28, 2013. Missouri's current Show MO Act was passed by state legislators in May 2023 and signed into law by Gov. Mike Parson on July 6, 2023.

O'Leary said it was remarkable to be the first crew back to Missouri, with 120 professionals on set and hundreds more in supportive background roles.

"I wasn't expecting to hear thanks from so many people for putting them back to work in jobs they love," he said. "Hopefully, this is helping to rebuild an important cottage industry for the state and region. I'm really excited that this is the beginning of something bigger than 'a' movie."



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On Fire Cast

"On Fire" stars several popular actresses and actors. Adult John O'Leary is played by Joel Courtney. William H. Macy plays sportscaster Jack Buck. John Corbett portrays O'Leary's father, Dennis O'Leary. Susan O'Leary will be played by Stephanie Szostak. Playing Beth O'Leary is Masey McLain. DeVon Franklin took on the role as Nurse Roy. Assistant director is Greg Zekowski.

John O'Leary said so many local people wanted to be part of the film that thousands of applications were received for filling more than 750 spots for extras in the movie.

"So many people applied, the producers had to make a second media announcement asking that people stop submitting because there were already thousands," he said.

With more than 800 submissions alone, the most desired role was "Little John O'Leary." O'Leary said talented boys from all over the world read for the role. Many of the young actors who applied are already in movies, active on daytime TV and are known for the outstanding work they do, he added.

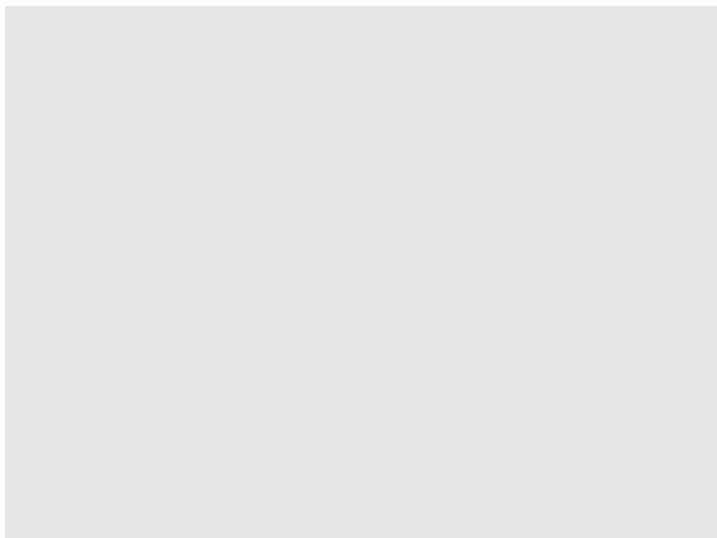
O'Leary said the team ultimately selected James McCracken. Although McCracken has never been to Hollywood and has limited parts in TV and movies, he is "also a kid who compared to the 800 other amazing actors, was clearly made for playing this role," according to O'Leary.

"I asked James his audition secret to bringing out the mischievousness, the precociousness, the joy, the agony and the determination of the character he was hoping to portray," shared O'Leary, who said McCracken smiled sweetly, looked away, gathered his answer and then said that right before the camera started rolling his dad gave him some advice: "'Be yourself. Be perfectly you.' So, that's what I did."

Further Outreach

Following the prose path of his parents, John O'Leary also authored a second, best-selling book in 2020, titled "In Awe: Rediscover Your Childlike Wonder To Unleash Inspiration, Meaning, and Joy."

In addition to recently filming "On Fire," internationally acclaimed speaker O'Leary hosted a sold-out "On Fire For Good" event on Nov. 25 at the Skip Viragh Center for the Arts.



John O'Leary on set at EdgeWild Restaurant & Winery in Chesterfield. | photo by Julie Brown Patton

O'Leary said the evening was part storytelling, part concert and all heart as he reminded everyone in attendance about the power to positively change the world.

"There's so much to celebrate when it comes to the potential we all have," he said, noting it was a powerful evening. "I glimpsed siblings that traveled to support me, even though I told them not to. I saw dear friends I've known for decades. Families I've bonded with by raising our kids together. Neighbors that will never truly know how much they've mattered to me. Past audience members who have become true friends. Clients that have become confidants.



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"It was emotional. It was humbling," O'Leary continued. "And it was validation. Validation of what I've talked about from the stage and the message I've written about, podcasted about and that will soon be the emotional center of a full-length feature film — that we can all, every single one of us, be used for good."

Is the idea for a second movie already shaping in O'Leary's mind? He said he's indeed contemplating one about ordinary heroes who did the right things at the right times.

"Out of the hottest fire comes the strongest steel," suggests a Chinese proverb. O'Leary lives that truism, and his personal journey of a captivating, encouraging strength for life is being captured in a movie to inspire others for decades to come.