

Canadian première of documentary examines lives of burn victims

BY KATY CAMPBELL, EDMONTON JOURNAL JUNE 2, 2014

EDMONTON - The Canadian première of a documentary that was up for Oscar consideration will be shown Tuesday at the University of Alberta.

Trial by Fire: Lives Re-Forged, directed by Megan Smith-Harris, follows the stories of seven fire survivors all badly burned under different circumstances. The documentary qualified for Oscar consideration last year, but did not make the short list. However, Smith-Harris said just being considered was a big achievement. It has already played around the U.S. and will air nationally on PBS this fall, however she said this Canadian screening holds a special spot.

"I'm Canadian, so that's really exciting for me," said Smith-Harris.

Originally from Toronto, she was a professional actress and writer for years and also co-wrote and performed for CBC. Once she hit her 30s, she decided to go back to school to study film in Toronto. Since then, she has produced, directed, and written a number of films. Always being drawn to a "good underdog story", Smith-Harris said she was inspired to make this film after seeing a photograph in a magazine of kids at a burn camp.

"I had never met a burn survivor. I had never even met a fire fighter and I was actually a little intimidated by burn survivors — the idea of them was scary to me," Smith-Harris said. "I just kinda got it. I realized no one wakes up expecting to be burned or expecting their life to be transformed by tragedy."

While the film surrounds a challenging subject, Smith-Harris said it's meant to be inspirational and uplifting in its message.

"It's a film that every body can relate to. I like to say that we've all had a trial by fire in our own lives where our life has been derailed by misfortune. Somebody dies, a job loss, a divorce, a death, an illness ... We have resilience and courage and strength," Smith-Harris said.

After seeing the film, a local Edmonton dermatologist, Dr. Barry Lycka, reached out to Smith-Harris and said he wanted to share the film with the Edmonton community. In doing so, he underwrote the première on Tuesday as a fundraiser for About Face, a Canadian charity that works to increase acceptance and understanding of those with facial differences including burn scars.

J.R. Martinez, a former U.S. army soldier who received burns to over 45 per cent of his body while serving in Iraq is just one of the seven stories featured in the film. A 15-year old girl in a chemistry experiment accident, a race car driver burned in her first race when she was 12, and a firefighter are also among the featured stories.

“The overarching theme of the film is honouring their courage and resilience but it’s also about compassion and engendering understanding for people who have differences of any kind,” Smith-Harris said.

The film will be shown at the Telus Centre for Professional Development at the University at 6 p.m. Tickets can be purchased at www.aboutface.ca/events/trial-by-fire-lives-re-forged/

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