

- NINA MOINI:** Minnesota's tourism arm is trying to jumpstart the state's film industry, and a brand new fund is helping local filmmakers get to the silver screen. The 10,000 Stories Fund by Explore Minnesota Film and FilmNorth has picked 10 filmmaking teams to receive \$10,000 to help create their work. Joining me now to share more is Nell Lawrenz-Wareham, Deputy Director of Explore Minnesota Film. Welcome back to the show, Nell.
- NELL LAWRENZ-WAREHAM:** Thanks for having me.
- NINA MOINI:** Also really happy to have one of the recipients of the fund, Filmmaker Alex Nystrom, who is a member of the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. Thanks for being here too, Alex.
- ALEX NYSTROM:** Thanks for having me.
- NINA MOINI:** Great to have both your perspectives. I'd love to start with you, Nell. When we last had you on, we talked about how this new film office with Explore Minnesota was trying to make Minnesota really a place where movies and TV shows are made. How is the new fund helping support that mission?
- NELL LAWRENZ-WAREHAM:** Thanks, Nina. This new fund, we're super proud of. It's giving out 10 \$10,000 grants to teams who are both nationally recognized, and also folks like Alex are going to be directing their first feature film. We know there's tons of talent here in Minnesota, and we also that development is one of the hardest stages for filmmakers, no matter what career stage you're in. And we're really proud that we are positioning Minnesota as a place that is welcoming to artists, welcoming to new ideas, and to the film business writ large.
- NINA MOINI:** And it's not just money, I understand. There's a mentorship, professional development, helping people make connections within the industry. How important are those parts of the puzzle?
- NELL LAWRENZ-WAREHAM:** They're really important. I mean, one of the number 1 things is just seeing the locations, which is another part of the program, is funding location scouting so that you can really move from the page to the screen. And when Alex was here last for Minnesota Film Festival, he and his producer were going between the festival and scouting, and that's really what this program is all about.
- NINA MOINI:** Hmm. Alex, congrats on being one of the recipients. Tell us a bit about your background in film and how you got to this point.
- ALEX NYSTROM:** Yeah, thanks for having me on. Yeah, I've spent about a decade learning the craft, from the camera department to producing. And now here I am, trying to direct my first feature film.
- NINA MOINI:** That's amazing. You know, Nell talked a little bit about how it can be really hard to get a film project off the ground, and how a fund like this can help filmmakers. Tell us a little bit about how hard that's been and just how this is going to be helpful.

ALEX NYSTROM: Yeah, the 10,000 Stories Fund is just so crucial at this point, because we're in late development right now. So we're getting ready to move into financing and packaging, so that's bringing on our cast and key creatives. And of course, we're going to start raising the money we need to make the film. And having this little bit of financial support and also the mentorship that comes with it is just incredibly valuable at this stage.

And like Nell was saying, we were scouting before, and we're actually planning to use this money to do a test shoot on film, which I'm really excited about, because I haven't directed on film before. So getting that hands-on experience is going to be incredibly valuable. And it's the kind of thing that's really difficult to do without this kind of support, so it feels like it's coming at exactly the right moment for our project.

NINA MOINI: Nice. I love to hear that. Nell, I think a lot of people listening might be wondering, I've seen some films that were made in Minnesota maybe more back in the day. Would you give our audience just an idea of where Minnesota fits in right now into filmmaking, into that industry?

NELL LAWRENZ-WAREHAM: Yeah, absolutely. Minnesota had a booming film industry in the '90s and early 2000s, and there was a more dormant period that we are coming out of. We've got three-- no, we've got four feature films shooting here in September, three up north and one in the metro that we're really excited about.

But programs like this help remind people who may be from the Midwest, but have moved away to pursue other professional opportunities, as well as people who are living here in the state with roots here, but for whatever reason, may fall outside of some of the existing support structures that other organizations may provide. This is really focused on projects that have that Minnesota connection that are ready to move forward, right? So we are thrilled about the program. And also, this is 10 new projects that will come and shoot here, which is fantastic.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, and I assume the more people see projects being done in a place, the more that sort attracts people and word of mouth. But Alex, your project is going to be your debut feature film, we talked about, as a director. And I understand it's called *Spiral*. Would you tell us a little bit about it?

ALEX NYSTROM: Yeah, of course. So *Spiral* follows an Ojibwe photographer who struggles to care for his grandmother, who is living with dementia, and insists his father's spirit is haunting him. And as he becomes obsessed with capturing proof of the haunting, he risks becoming a ghost himself. So it's a supernatural horror film about memory, inheritance, and the fear of losing what connects us.

NINA MOINI: Hmm. And I understand you're being really intentional about production crew and staffing, having majority Native American folks on the team. Why is that so important to you, Alex?

ALEX NYSTROM: It's incredibly important because the first opportunity or the third opportunity-- it doesn't matter where it is-- you're always looking to take your next step in your career. And because it's a project-based industry, you really need to always foster those relationships. And so I'm hoping to take this opportunity to develop a sort of crew program, a crew building program for Native folks where we're going to shoot, and hopefully train them and bring them onto our crew.

NINA MOINI: Awesome. So Nell, right now in the state of Minnesota, I understand that in order to receive a tax credit for producing a film here, that a filmmaker has to spend at least \$1 million in production costs. And in the state legislature this year, a bill was introduced to try to lower that minimum to around \$400,000. The bill did not pass in the last session. I know Explore Minnesota wasn't involved directly in that effort, but what are some of the other ways your office is trying to incentivize filmmaking in Minnesota? Because whether it's \$1 million or \$400,000, that's a lot of money.

**NELL
LAWRENZ-
WAREHAM:** It is a lot of money, and filmmaking takes many years and many people. It's different than, for example, painting or photography. And so you'll see when you look at the 10,000 Stories program, we've structured it in such a way that should incentive levels change, that all of these projects would be well poised to use the tax incentive. But we are certainly looking to adapt to the times, keep modernizing the incentive, and make sure that folks know that we are open for business, and responding to the way that business changes.

We recently had a fully crowdfunded film use the tax incentive, the *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, which was fantastic. And we've also had verticals apply and group their applications together. So we're really trying to stay nimble while we look for the legislature to make further changes.

NINA MOINI: And I know you both mentioned some of the projects happening now across the state. Alex, what do you look for? What were you looking for in terms of location? I'm interested in that, scouting locations.

**ALEX
NYSTROM:** Yeah. So I'm making the crazy decision to make a film in the winter in Minnesota, and so that's going to be a feat unto itself.

NINA MOINI: [LAUGHS]

**ALEX
NYSTROM:** But yeah, one of our key locations is actually an ice cave, and so we've actually been scouting various places that could stage as a cave. And so we were actually touring a couple of those options. And you can find caves in the strangest of places. We were looking sort of behind the scenes at a zoo near Duluth, like old zoo cages and stuff like that. So you never what you find when you put your mind to it when you're fusing the creative with the logistical. So scouting can actually be quite fun.

NINA MOINI: No, it sounds fun. Nell, what are you hoping for the film industry here in Minnesota for a decade from now? What would it take for you to say, wow, we're really on the map here in Minnesota in terms of filmmaking?

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LAWRENZ-
WAREHAM:** Mm-hmm. I mean, something-- a healthy ecosystem has range and has diversity. So I hope that we'll have lots of indie filmmakers coming here to do their first-time feature, like Alex. We didn't mention this earlier, but I first saw Alex's work back in 2023. I was serving on the jury at Indie Memphis when he had a short, which was where he was first incubating these ideas. And now we're in 2026, and he's working on the feature, right?

So in a year, we may see them move into production. But in 10 years, hopefully you can sit down at home and watch 10 great films made in Minnesota. Comedies, rom coms. We've got television series. We've got a bunch of feature films. That just shows how much variety there is in our state, and also that these are high-quality films. Like Alex was saying, he's able to shoot on film, which helps him raise money and really distinguish himself in the festival landscape, both nationally and internationally. We really want high-quality talent to choose Minnesota, and we want to support the talent that's here.

NINA MOINI: All right, Nell and Alex, super cool. Wishing you both the best. Thanks for stopping by the show.

NELL
LAWRENZ-
WAREHAM:

Thank you.

ALEX
NYSTROM:

Thank you.