

# ASU filmmaker highlights lifesaving work during a Phoenix heat crisis

## **‘A New Inferno’ documentary shows ways EMTs treat heat stroke during the summer**

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News  
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A new documentary by an Arizona State University filmmaker captures the frantic moment when medics bring a man back from the brink of death with a low-tech lifesaving measure.

“A New Inferno,” a 16-minute film by [Nita Blum-Reddick](#), follows a crew from the Phoenix Fire Department as they race to treat people suffering from heat stroke during the brutally hot summer of 2025.

The documentary, which had its world premiere at the SXSW Festival in March, will be widely available on July 24, when the New York Times will post it on its Op-Doc section of the website.

The documentary was screened on May 7 at the Hall of Flame Firefighting Museum in Phoenix, and was followed by a panel discussion about the surge in local heat-related deaths and how the fire department responds.

“These fire people are hardworking, but it is so much more than that. They are soldiers, angels. They are saviors that we witnessed firsthand last summer when we filmed this project,” said Blum-Reddick, clinical assistant professor in The Sidney Poitier New American Film School. She co-directed the documentary with Jonathan Pickett.

The filmmakers were able to gain the trust of the fire department and the medics in telling their story.

“They were kind, they were open, they were incredibly supportive. They just wanted to see this film get made to share the good work that everyone does,” she said.

“A New Inferno” shows how the department started using the immersion method after previously treating heat stroke patients with small ice packs and intravenous cold saline.

Many of the patients treated for heat stroke are homeless, using drugs or both. In the film, the medics are seen approaching a man lying on the ground, quickly opening one of the body bags, placing him in it and dumping ice onto him. He’s taken to St. Joseph’s Hospital, which records his temperature as 107.8 degrees.

As the camera rolls, EMT Jason Smith describes the ice-immersion method: “I mean, it’s so simple, right? This is kind of barbaric in a sense because it’s just a blue bag with ice, but the heat is definitely not going away and this is all we have right now.”

Amazingly, that life-or-death scene was captured on the first day of filming, Blum-Reddick said.

“You never want to root for tragedy, ever. But the flip side of that was that we wanted to make sure that we filmed an ice immersion in the field,” she said.

As the film crew, including cinematographer Ryan Dent, waited in the station, the call came in and the captain told them, “This is it.”

“Ryan had to grab the camera off the side of the truck and not get in the way of someone’s life being saved, which he did a great job of and captured it really wonderfully,” she said.

“It was huge because we did not get another (ice-immersion scenario) for the entire rest of the summer that we were filming with Station 18.”

The filmmaking process was lean and efficient, Blum-Reddick said.

“A lot of what Jonathan and I did was self-funded or crowdfunded.

“We have a lot of footage, but we were very nimble. We were in really hot conditions. So we had to be very strict on what days we were going out, and the scheduling and what shots we were going to get, and be very tight around that.”

Blum-Reddick teaches a course called Documentary for Social Impact, in which students [create short films](#) for small nonprofits.

During the panel discussion, KJZZ reporter Katherine Davis-Young said that the pandemic-fueled housing crisis and subsequent increase in homelessness helped to create the crisis of 2023, when there were 645 heat-related deaths — the most ever.

“We had 31 days in a row over 110 degrees, which is just astonishing,” she said of that summer. She covers the heat crisis for KJZZ.

On July 19, 2023, the overnight low was 97 degrees, a record that stands.

“And when the body can’t get a chance to cool off overnight, that’s when you start seeing a lot of heat stroke,” she said.

Last year, there were 430 heat-related deaths, a decline Davis-Young attributes not only to the ice-immersion treatments but also to 24-hour cooling centers and better coordination among local

governments.

Ice immersion reduced mortality rates in heat stroke patients by half, according to Charles Finch, Phoenix Fire Medical Director.

Before adopting the treatment, “what we found is that in the hospital, if you came in with a temperature of 106, you weren’t walking out neurologically intact,” he said, noting that the patient in the documentary was released after a few days.

“We’re saving lives and we’re doing it because of what you guys are doing in the field,” he said.

Smith praised “A New Inferno” for showing the outcomes of the EMTs’ work.

“After leaving that call, after leaving the hospital, we carried on with the day. We did everything we could to give this gentleman a fighting chance,” he said.

“So to hear and to see that what we did actually mattered ... thank you.”

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*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## Main image



A scene from the documentary screening of “A New Inferno” showing paramedics using an ice immersion bag to treat a man with heat stroke. The film, which was co-directed by ASU filmmaker Nita Blum-Reddick, debuted at SXSW in March and was shown at the Hall of Flame Firefighting

Museum in Phoenix on May 7. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

## Text image(s)



"A New Inferno" co-director Nita Blum-Reddick thanks those involved with the film's production after a screening held at the Hall of Flame Fire Museum in Phoenix on Thursday, May 7. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News





Phoenix Fire paramedic Jason Smith (second from left) speaks on a panel after a screening of the documentary “A New Inferno” at the Hall of Flame Fire Museum in Phoenix on Thursday, May 7. Also on the panel (from left) ASU Associate Professor Jennifer Vanos (moderator); Charles Finch, Phoenix Fire Department medical director; Maki Lloyd, Phoenix Fire’s deputy chief of EMS; Katherine Davis-Young, KJZZ heat desk reporter; and film co-director Nita Blum-Reddick, a clinical assistant professor of production. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News