Through a lens brightly
How a St. Paul physician mixes movie-making and medicine.

BY SARAH T. WILLIAMS

By his junior year at the University of Kansas, Jon T. O’Neal had already zoomed through his pre-med requirements and was pondering what to do with his remaining time in college when his older brother gave him a bit of advice that would crack open his universe: “Take art or music history classes,” he said. “There will be questions on the MCAT.”

“That was back in the day when people thought physicians should be ‘well-rounded,’” says O’Neal, flashing one of many good-natured grins during a recent interview.

O’Neal heeded his brother’s advice and enrolled in an art history class. The visuals went straight to the pleasure center of his brain: “I just loved it,” he says. “It wasn’t even like studying.”

From that moment on, O’Neal pursued parallel and sometimes interweaving tracks: one in medicine and the other in photography, screenwriting and filmmaking. He now is director of the HealthPartners Occupational Medicine Residency Program and author of about a dozen screenplays, one of which became a full-fledged movie that won recognition at the 2011 Cannes Independent Film Festival.

Discovering the muse
If we were to rewind the tape of O’Neal’s life to find the moment of his artistic awakening, we’d be in the basement of the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas, circa 1977, where O’Neal and his undergraduate classmates were granted a look at the hidden treasures. The museum’s director pulled out a stunning oil landscape that grabbed O’Neal’s attention. “I want to do my honors thesis on that painting,” he announced.

The work was by Birger Sandzén, a Swedish artist who immigrated to the United States in the 1890s to become an art professor at Bethany College in Lindsborg, Kansas. His bold interpretation of the rolling plains, rocky outcrops, gnarled oaks and the Smoky River and Valley earned him the nickname “The Van Gogh of Kansas.” O’Neal felt an instant affinity for Sandzén, who had discovered beauty in what others might regard as forbidding, frozen or lonely. In his own work, most notably in his 2011 film “Au Pair, Kansas,” O’Neal would strive to replicate that love of place.

First forays in film
O’Neal’s aptitude for the visual arts was in part a gift from his mother, who had been an art student at the University of Kansas. But because he could not paint (“no hand-eye coordination,” he insists), O’Neal chose a camera as the outlet for his creativity.

During his junior year in college, he took classes at the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts, learning the basics. He took a year off before starting medical school, primarily to spend more time with his father, who had been diagnosed with malignant melanoma, and explore using his camera.

During this break, he joined the mobile office staff of U.S. Sen. Bob Dole. As he traveled for Dole, and as he drove back and forth...
from Kansas to Colorado Springs, where his parents had moved after retirement, O’Neal shot photos in all 105 of the state’s counties. In retrospect, he regards the collection as “a rank imitation of the work of Walker Evans.” Nevertheless, it is now in two Kansas museums and at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

O’Neal’s next project behind the lens was inspired by his work as an intern at the U.S. Air Force hospital in San Antonio during the mid-1980s. Doctors had just begun to test for HIV antibodies; anyone in the service who tested positive was sent to San Antonio. Besides checking for enlarged lymph nodes and Kaposi’s lesions, there was little O’Neal could do medically for his patients. However, there was something he could do about the thick wall of silence that surrounded them. To create a safe place for his patients to meet and talk, O’Neal helped establish the San Antonio AIDS Foundation in the Bonham Exchange, a local bar.

In the empty upstairs ballroom, semi-consciously aware that he was witnessing an important chapter in medical and cultural history, he began photographing the torsos of his patients and their friends. When combined as a mosaic, the images had a simple symmetry that reminded him of the ancient Cycladic idols that he had studied in art history. In creating the piece, “The Bonham Exchange,” he felt he had transformed the purely clinical into a work that was both aesthetic and of historic value.

“It’s not just a picture, it’s about what’s behind the picture,” he says. Curators at the Museum of Modern Art in New York agreed and accepted O’Neal’s photographs into the museum’s permanent collection.

Late nights at Harvard
Just as O’Neal was about to complete his military service, the Air Force made him an offer he couldn’t refuse: full ride for a master’s in public health and a residency in occupational medicine at Harvard.

There he learned about environmental toxins, management of blood-borne pathogens, prevention of workplace injuries, exposure investigations and industrial hygiene. And he began to explore yet another form of artistic expression: screenwriting.

Working late at night, O’Neal began writing a screenplay loosely based on real-life events: His older brother’s roommate in medical school had died of AIDS, and Magic Johnson had just announced his HIV-positive status. O’Neal wrote a fictional story about a female physician who falls in love with a baseball player who happens to be HIV-positive.

To his surprise, he found himself channeling his characters’ feelings. In medicine and in the military, “we train and drain the emotions out of our lives,” he says. “And this was obviously very cathartic for me. I could open up and tell myself, ‘It’s OK to feel emotion. It’s OK to cry.’”

Although the screenplay didn’t get produced, the process of writing it helped him to become a more empathic listener, which O’Neal says is the biggest impact art has had on his life.