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CHARACTER**

Coal powered

JONATHAN HESLOP'S CREATIVE SPARK BURNS BRIGHT WITH SAINT LOUIS CHARCOAL CO.



THE JONATHAN HESLOP FILE

Owner: The Saint Louis Charcoal Co.

Hangouts: The Timbers in Eureka, Al's Restaurant, Lona's Lil Eats, or at home on the family's five acres on the cliffs above the Meramec River

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Jonathan Heslop was a medical airlift helicopter pilot with a penchant for grilling when one evacuation trip in rural Missouri changed the course of his career.

Heslop, who spent a decade as a pilot for O'Fallon, Missouri-based Air Evac Lifeteam, was always on the lookout for the hard-to-find lump charcoal that he liked to use when barbecuing. One day he was airlifting a patient out of the helipad in Sullivan, Missouri, when he looked down and saw a loading dock filled with pallets

of the very charcoal he was seeking.

"I lifted the helicopter and I started accelerating over the trees and I look down and there's the charcoal plant," Heslop said. "I was so excited, and I wanted to circle around, but this guy's bleeding to death, so I couldn't do that. So I hit the button on the GPS to log the location, and the next day I'm driving down there. I drive around all over and eventually found the place back in the woods."

That trip eventually led to what is now Saint Louis Charcoal Co., the Eureka-based charcoal distribution company that Heslop owns and operates. Saint Louis Charcoal is the exclusive

distributor for the Rockwood brand of lump charcoal, which Heslop created. The Rockwood brand is now available in more than 60 locations in the St. Louis metro area and more than 3,500 locations across the country, a majority of which are Ace Hardware stores.

Sales at Saint Louis Charcoal topped \$1 million last year, and Heslop, 35, is expecting this year to be even higher. In addition to the lump charcoal, Saint Louis Charcoal also sells charcoal-based agricultural products, such as a soil amendment made out of the fine charcoal matter that gets sifted out of the lump charcoal. The company also recently expanded into selling

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barbecue supplies and equipment, including the Big Green Egg, the kamado-style ceramic charcoal cooker that Heslop swears by. The company also is launching a line of smoking woods that will be available in the St. Louis region this summer.

“Not only does Jonathan have vision, he also gets things done. It’s always great to hear about his newest idea, because we know it will be completely fresh and completely successful,” said Mike Spakowski, principal at Atomicdust, the creative agency that worked with Heslop on creating the Rockwood brand. “He is driven, and we’re always excited and proud to partner with him.”

Beyond the grill, Heslop also is a residential real estate agent with Real Living Gateway Real Estate in south St. Louis County and sold \$2 million worth of real estate last year. And he has a wide range of outside interests, including buying and restoring old pinball machines, serving as a concealed carry instructor for the states of Missouri and Illinois, and collecting aviation artifacts and relics. He also has restored a 1981 DeLorean, is a yellow belt in the Israeli martial art Krav Maga and serves on the school board of Sacred Heart Catholic School in Eureka.

Heslop and his wife, Erica, have four sons, ranging in age from 8 to 3.

You’re a native of the metro area? I grew up in Belleville. My wife and I went to high school at Althoff in Belleville. And then I went to Saint Louis University for college with a bachelor’s in aviation management. I took 32 credit hours a semester and graduated in under two years, dean’s list magna cum laude. I went to school nonstop. They told me I had the highest tuition of any student in the college. Then I went to grad school and got my MBA at Fontbonne, which was fantastic. I was working full time through all of that.

What attracted you to aviation? I traveled a lot with my dad when I was a kid. He was a salesman and was gone six days a week, a different city every day. My mom was a school teacher, so all summer we’d travel with my dad nonstop. We went all over the world traveling with him. I was always in an airplane somewhere. When I was 12 or 13, he took a vice president job with a company up in Chesterfield, and somehow convinced them to let him use a private plane to



Jonathan Heslop, pictured here in 2004, flew a helicopter solo on his 16th birthday, the minimum age.

get around to visit all their clients because they were in places like Rolla, Springfield, Des Moines. Places where it didn’t make sense for him to fly on a commercial airline, and where it would take too long to drive. He got them to charter him a small plane, and I got the flight time out of it. So I got my first 100 hours flying basically with his company paying the dime on it.

When did you get your pilot’s license? I soloed in a helicopter on my 16th birthday, then took the checkride and received my private pilot’s certificate on my 17th birthday. That’s the minimum age for both. As soon as I got out of high school in May 2000, I started working for a small company at Spirit of St. Louis Airport. I was pushing helicopters around and answering the phone for the first year or two. I worked there for five years. This was the early 2000s, and helicopter pilots started to be in short supply because all the Vietnam vets were retiring. So insurance minimums were coming down as my flying time started coming up and we met in the middle and suddenly I was flying for a living. I started flying a lot because the economy was good – training, doing tours, doing aerial photography. When I hit 2,000 hours of flight time in 2004, that’s when I was graduating from Fontbonne with my MBA, and Air Evac had an opening out in St. Clair, so I worked in St. Clair for nine years. I was the base pilot supervisor for the last year, then they moved the base out to Sullivan, it was a little too far for me to drive and I took a job at headquarters as a flight instructor, and I did that for about six months. In between

there, I was working part time on my days off for Helicopters Inc., flying for Channels 2, 4 and 5 doing breaking news.

Where you always interested in grilling? When I was a kid, we’d travel all over the country and eat at the finest restaurants, but when my dad was in town, we always were out barbecuing. It was just something fun we did. My dad bought me a Big Green Egg as a wedding present, and it needed good charcoal, and I could never find it. There was always just junk charcoal. There was this one brand that I liked, and I would buy it all whenever I would see it. I knew it was made somewhere down by Steelville, but I could never find it.

How did that experience lead to the formation of Saint Louis Charcoal Co.? I found that plant, and they would sell me the charcoal for \$5 a bag. So I loaded up the back of my Explorer, and I brought it back up here and immediately I took a bunch over to my dad. His neighbor sees me unloading it and he wanted some. Guys at work wanted some; friends wanted some, and that 20 bags I brought back was gone in a couple days. I went back down there, got some more. Word got out. I bought some more. And I thought, I might take a trailer down there. So I have all this charcoal packed in my garage, and my wife is getting mad at me because she can’t get her car in there, so I put it on Craigslist. Lump charcoal, 100 percent. I think I was selling it for about \$7 or \$8 a bag. I just wanted to cover my gas and maybe getting something fixed on my truck by the end of the year. That first year I sold like 150 bags. I was elated. I thought that was the coolest thing ever. The next year I sold 300 bags. The next year I sold 700 bags. Then the next year, I had someone in retail call me and say can you pick that up and sell it in our shop. But then that plant got bought up and closed, and I had to find another charcoal plant to continue. I found a new plant and sold blank bags as I laid out plans for a brand. I hired a creative marketing company – Atomicdust – and we created the Rockwood brand in late 2012.

Do you still grill a lot yourself? Every day. When you have an unrestricted supply of charcoal, why not?

What’s your favorite thing to grill? Seafood and scallops on a Himalayan salt block.