

# YONKERS RISING

PRESORTED  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
White Plains, NY  
Permit #7164

Vol 111 Number 41

www.RisingMediaGroup.com

Friday, October 7, 2016

## YoFi Fest to Feature Documentary About Yonkers Inventor

By Bud Mikhitarian

Yonkers boasts many firsts and the famous, but one local man stands out—because he changed the world. A compelling documentary about a long time Yonkers resident and his transformative invention has just been completed and will play at this year's YoFiFest held October 16th - 23rd in venues all over southern Westchester.

The film, *All Things Bakelite* by director John Maher, tells the revealing, little-known story of Belgian-born American chemist Dr. Leo H. Baekeland. In 1907, he was experimenting in his barn-converted laboratory off Roberts Avenue and North Broadway when he created the world's first wholly synthetic polymer material. He called it "Bakelite"—the grand daddy of modern plastic.

Baekeland's innovation marked the beginning of the modern industrial age and facilitated the inventions of such contemporaries as Thomas Edison, A. G. Bell, Henry Ford and the Wright Brothers. Baekeland's Bakelite Corporation and its licensed affiliates produced millions of pounds of Bakelite and sold it worldwide for the manufacturing of everyday products that forever changed how we live. Today, Bakelite's components are everywhere—in varnishes, cell phones, electrical components, car parts, clocks, dinnerware, toilet seats, toys, pens, billiard balls, and collectible Art Deco jewelry, to name a few.

Baekeland, a scientific genius with a global



Leo Hendrik Baekeland working in his laboratory in Snug Rock, the Harmony Park section of Yonkers, will be one of the many films at this year's YoFi Fest

vision, immigrated to America with his new bride and a dream to do great things through pure science. He filed over 100 patents, including Ve-

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### YoFi Fest

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lox photographic paper, which he developed at his Yonkers-based Nepera Chemical Company. He sold that patent to George Eastman who built the commercial success of Eastman Kodak on it. Velox paper made Baekeland his first fortune and gave him the freedom to experiment with new chemistry, which led to his invention of Bakelite. *All Things Bakelite* depicts Baekeland's inspiring creativity, persistence and entrepreneurship as he gained his place among America's leading innovators. The film is an in-depth exploration of science, art and humanity, yet it never fails to be entertaining, funny, and thought provoking all at the same time.

On a deeper level, the film contemplates the consequences of progress. What is our social responsibility as we face the double-edged sword that is plastic, an unquestionably beneficial, yet ubiquitous and indestructible material? It challenges us to act with the same foresight, purpose and dedication that drove Baekeland, so that we might mitigate and solve the problems created by humankind's unbridled consumerism.

The executive producer of *All Things Bakelite* is Hugh Karraker, a great grandson of Leo H. Baekeland. He brought 62 hand-written diaries by Baekeland and countless artifacts from Baekeland's life and laboratory to the film, all of which lend a distinguishing authenticity and intimacy to the production. Through these personal items and along with family photos and re-enactments, Baekeland's struggles and suc-

cesses come to life in the film. Particularly vivid are the laboratory scenes showing Baekeland at work in his barn at Snug Rock, his mansion in the Harmony Park section of the city. There, the "Father of Modern Plastics" lived and worked for fifty years until his death in 1944. Snug Rock was totally destroyed by fire in 1957, but Karraker and other heirs have preserved thousands of objects from Baekeland's life, many of which have been donated to museums and are on display throughout the world, including in the Smithsonian National Museum of American History and at our own Hudson River Museum in Trevor Park.

*All Things Bakelite* was selected for inclusion in this year's YoFiFest from a highly competitive field of entries, winning notice for both its quality and local subject matter interest. The festival is now in its fourth year and is a celebration of moving pictures, the people who make them and the people who watch them. It draws film-friendly audiences from NYC, Westchester County, the Hudson Valley and the entire NY/NJ/CT tri-state region, and offers a full schedule of screenings, workshops and parties that celebrate the independent, artistic spirit from around the world and right in our own back yard.

A free screening of *All Things Bakelite* is scheduled for Saturday, October 22, 10:30 A.M. at 66 Main on the Waterfront in Downtown Yonkers, the hub of the festival. The film is suitable for general audiences with any interests in science, design, business, environmental issues, or just fun. More information about film screenings, tickets and schedules are available at YoFiFest.com.