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## Filmmaker Mike Akel Talks Teaching and Tennis

By [Jordan Gass-Poore](#) on June 28, 2012 - 10:00am in [Local Cast and Crew](#)

On an early summer afternoon, amid the sound of squeaky toys and his neighbor's Boxer barking, Houston-based filmmaker [Mike Akel](#) and I discussed his segue from teaching to film, his dramedy, *An Ordinary Family* (Slackerwood's [AFF 2011 interview](#)), and his latest foray into the world of tennis.



The co-writer/director of the 2006 award-winning mockumentary *Chalk* said he and his writing partner, co-film producer [Matt Patterson](#), began working on *An Ordinary Family* in February 2010 (read [Mike's review](#)). The writing process took about four months to complete. After 18 days of filming on location in Austin and Lago Vista in June 2010 and editing in the fall, the film was accepted by the [Los Angeles Film Festival](#) and premiered in June 2011. *An Ordinary Family* went on to receive the Best Feature award at the [New Orleans Film Festival](#) and has been released on DVD, and is for rent or sale online through digital channels.

*An Ordinary Family* screened across the state last spring through [Texas Independent Film Network](#) (TIFN), the Austin-based statewide coalition of film societies, universities and independent theaters. TIFN screens a different Texas independent film each month on tour. I originally became intrigued by the movie when it was scheduled to screen at my school, Texas State University - San Marcos. The screening was canceled, but I pursued Akel for an interview nonetheless. I am working toward an English secondary teaching certification and Akel's film *Chalk* may or may not have been the reason why I now hope to pursue a career teaching English as a second language in Spain, not in a U.S. public school.

Akel, a Missouri State University alumnus, recently completed his third year teaching filmmaking at a private high school in Houston. He mentored Houston filmmakers Andrew Edison and Luke Loftin, and is credited as executive producer on their film *Bindlestiffs*, which played Slamdance this year. He is currently at work on a tennis-themed comedy, *Glossy Pines*.

"I'm actually about to step out on the waters again," Akel said. "So, I'm leaving (teaching). I can only work three years and then I have to leave."

I suppose there's only so much chalk you can breathe in before you go in search of clean air.

### Slackerwood: What made you want to go into teaching?

**Mike Akel:** It was kind of a combo of things. One is, I love working with kids; and then two, you gotta pay the bills. I was wanting to make films and I was also acting, and I worked at Starbucks, which I loved. I just needed some more money and insurance and such. I actually taught tennis for a while. I played tennis in college, and that's actually a job that pays really well hourly, country clubs and such; and then I was just tired of that. So a friend of mine was teaching at one of the high schools, a filmmaking class, and I was like, "Man, I can do this." There were no openings, and then the guy left in the middle of the summer and they called me.

### How many years did you teach?

**Akel:** Well, I taught three years at Travis High [William B. Travis High School in Austin] and then my third year, my writing partner and friend from forever -- he was teaching at Lanier [Lanier High School in Austin] -- and we started working on *Chalk*, writing stuff during the school year, and we planned on shooting during the summer in 2004. We finished in June.

Every year I'm like, "Well, am I gonna come back (to teaching)?" I just felt like it was the time to take that leap of faith and finish the film, and I felt like it was a professional film we captured. So, we took a year to edit. I had a few other jobs writing for a studio project, then I taught a semester at UT and had a job with a company producing web videos. Then when I moved down to Houston three years ago I was looking for a job and found one at a private high school.

### How did you get involved with TIFN and the Austin Film Society scene?

**Akel:** I think when I moved to Austin in '96, pretty quickly I was doing acting and then short films. And, really, the [Austin Film Festival](#) and [SXSW](#) and AFS, I just kind of

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found those pretty quickly. Started going to Texas Documentary Tours at the Alamo Drafthouse downtown and just kind of plugged into the community that way. I've gone to those festivals as just a student, as a filmmaker with my films and as a panelist ... at all levels I've been a part of AFF. And then really, the network, I guess Ryan Long saw a rough cut of ours (*An Ordinary Family*) and he really liked the rough cut and he approached our editor, who he knew, and said, "Hey, would you guys be interested?"

**Where was *An Ordinary Family* screened through TIFN?**

**Akel:** Let's see, we screened at West Texas A&M, Lubbock, Houston, Austin, Baylor, San Antonio ...

**What kind of feedback have you received from *An Ordinary Family* screenings through TIFN?**

**Akel:** West Texas A&M, in particular, you know, a lot of us probably had our stereotypes downloaded, but, man, I believe we had two LGBT organizations to help sponsor, so they really got the word out. And then the film studies program was also promoting (the film). I think we had a fairly large LGBT community there for the screening.

Some of the cool things we've heard, that I really like, is someone had just become a Christian and they were afraid to go home and tell their family 'cause they're, like, atheist. It's just funny because this movie's about a guy that's from the South coming out later in life and he's coming home to his religious family. It doesn't matter what it is, sometimes you go home and the people love you even if they don't believe the same as you. That's kind of our theme, our tag: you don't have to agree with someone to love them.

**Where did you draw inspiration for (*An Ordinary Family*)?**

**Akel:** I would say it's a combination of things. I've had friends for years that would say they're gay ... People that weren't gay got married, a woman (came) out that's always been gay... and then you mix in Christianity or religion and belief in God and the DNA of how we're made and that whole thing and talking with a lot of friends. Also, being a teacher, it's such a hot topic. One of the schools, in particular, the big issue one year, the whole diversity thing, and being really sensitive. And then there's teachers who say, "Oh, I don't really want that. Teachers shouldn't be pushing this." So, it's just kind of one of those topics. I haven't seen a lot of what you would call "gay movies," but I know in the mainstream stuff I haven't seen much that deals with some of the religious components. There's a real deep belief system that people are having to deal with.

**What's next?**

**Akel:** I've been writing another film this year called *Glossy Pines*. It's a comedy. We're calling it right now *Caddyshack* meets *Napoleon Dynamite* in the world of competitive tennis. It's a small Texas town -- instead of being all about football, all about tennis. But the town's gone bankrupt, so they need to save the tennis center -- it's next on the chopping block. And then the main character's kind of a down-on-his-luck tennis teacher who has to save the day, but the main hurdle is when his archrival comes back to town to play in the tournament.

[Photo credit: Mike Akel, from the *An Ordinary Family* website.]