

From in front of the class to behind the camera

Former math teacher Al Smith pursues his dream of filmmaking

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Mr. Smith is pursuing his lifelong dream of becoming a filmmaker.

Photo courtesy of Al Smith

Almost everyone has a dream -- whether it's becoming a professional sports player, a successful artist, or a famous Hollywood actor. For former Pike math teacher Al Smith's dream has always been filmmaking. But Mr. Smith has never had the opportunity to pursue film full-time until now.

"I've always had a passion for film and to tell stories," Mr. Smith said. "The unfortunate thing is, I was born and raised in Indianapolis and making a living from being a filmmaker is highly unlikely."

Growing up in Indianapolis the late '80s and early '90s, the profession Smith dreamed of -- filmmaking -- wasn't available. He moved to Atlanta for roughly eight years and took up the career of marketing, which is in close proximity to film.

"I produced and made creative projects on the side," said Mr. Smith.

Mr. Smith moved back to Indianapolis in 2008 to pursue a marketing job at Finish Line and to be closer to family.

Smith eventually began teaching Algebra at Pike.

For his class ice breakers, while other teachers typically have students introduce themselves, Mr. Smith asked his students what their favorite film was.

“From that I was able to learn more about that student,” said Smith.

Kathy Mitchell, a former coworker, said he was successful as a teacher in part because he recognized students’ behavior in class.

“A lot of students gravitated towards him,” said Ms. Mitchell, who is the math department co-chair. “He had a lot of good relationships with students.”

2020 Pike graduate Jenna Owens said Mr. Smith helped her connect her passion for writing with filmmaking. Owens participated in Mr. Smith’s Future Filmmakers Academy.

“He really had a way of connecting with his students,” Owens said.

Although Mr. Smith enjoyed teaching, his dream of pursuing filmmaking full-time had always been in the back of his mind. He took it as a sign to end his teaching career when his filmmaking checks began to outweigh his teaching salary. With film being his full-time job, Mr. Smith now has more time to focus on bigger and better projects. He now has his own film studio, and is able to use various locations to film his pieces.

Mr. Smith is currently working on two documentaries, both focusing on Black history. Mr. Smith says he takes an interest in portraying Black people in his films. Some of his student audience notices this effort.

“I think it’s important to see African-Americans on film since the industry is mostly white,” Owens said.

Mr. Smith is currently working on a piece that he thinks will “push the limits of film,” a virtual reality film on the life and times of Lewis Lattimer, a Black inventor who is often not credited with helping invent the lightbulb.

“I’m really pushing technology. The audience will be watching the film through virtual reality,” Mr. Smith said.

He said he is planning on buying a school bus, renovating it, and inviting an audience to come onto the bus to watch his film.

“This is probably the biggest (film) that I’ve ever produced,” he said.

Mr. Smith’s former students responded in distress when he told them he would not be returning to Pike for the 2021-2022 school year.

“I was sad when he said he wouldn’t be coming back,” Owens said.

Mr. Smith hasn’t stopped teaching, however. He currently teaches an online program called Future Filmmakers Masterclass, which has expanded to 20 different cities across the country.

Although he no longer teaches at Pike, students and staff continue to support and wish him the best.

