

# Alex Graves

b. 1965



Alexander J. Graves was born on July 23, 1965 to William R. and Alexandra Meyer Graves. The family lived in Kansas City, Missouri at the time of his birth. He has one sister, Anne E. Graves, now living in El Dorado, Kansas. In El Dorado, the Graves family made their home at 1842 Circle Drive.

Graves still remembers back to when he was 11 years old, making his own movies with a Super 8 camera. His father remembered the time when, for about a year and a half, there was a space vehicle parked in his garage while Alex filmed his young friends acting out science fiction fantasies.

Bill Graves said that his son knew even back then what he was doing; after filming was completed, Alex would scratch the film to make it appear the light sabers in those movies were really firing light.

A self-confessed “Star Wars” fanatic, Graves wanted to tell stories on film ever since he saw the George Lucas classic eighteen times as a teenager in El Dorado. Though desiring to head straight for California after high school, his parents convinced him to attend the University of Kansas first.

Graves attended the University of Kansas for two years taking film classes for the first time under Chuck Berg, an enthusiastic and articulate professor who inspired the upcoming filmmaker. He later transferred to study film at the University of Southern California’s film school; he earned his degree there in 1987.

Alex and his wife, Sarah Graves, live in Santa Monica, California, and are the parents of two children, Benjamin and Alexandra. He holds membership in the Screen Actors Guild.

He continues to work in the television and motion picture fields, inspiring other beginning filmmakers who study his techniques. Sean Astin, star of such films as Rudy and The Lord of the Rings trilogy, when taking on a job directing an episode of The WB network’s series Angel, said “it’s a very specific challenge, directing episodic television, and I was fortunate enough . . . to observe Alex Graves on The West Wing for a week . . . I literally just sat there on the set, watching . . . and trying to get to know the powers-that-be.”

## CONNECTION TO BUTLER COUNTY

Alex grew up in El Dorado, Kansas, where he attended local grade school through high school. He graduated from El Dorado High School in 1983, where he had been a very active participant in Michele Banks' drama department.

Alex's grandfather, Courtney Graves, came to El Dorado in 1922 as a partner in a drug store. By the 1930s, there were three Graves Drug Stores in El Dorado; in the 1980s, the company operated stores in four Kansas towns and two in Oklahoma.

Courtney and his wife were the parents of two sons, John and Alex's father, Bill. Following college and time spent in the United States Navy, Bill worked for many years as a reporter for the Kansas City Star before returning to El Dorado to become a partner in Graves Drug Stores. Alex's mother, known to her friends as Sandy, at one time worked for former Senator Nancy Kassebaum Baker.

## LEAVING THE AREA

A native of El Dorado, Alex left town to attend college, first studying at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, then at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles.

Graves says that Michele Banks, his drama teacher in high school, and Bob Peterson, theater instructor at Butler County Community College, were his first major influences in his eventual career path.

## ACHIEVEMENTS

Following college, Graves learned special effects while working on James Cameron's 1989 sci-fi thriller, *The Abyss*. He then worked at writing his first film, *The Crude Oasis*. The talent-friendly studio Miramax saw it and bought it, releasing it in 1995. The film had been written, produced, directed, and edited by Alex, who joined a handful of other talented first-time filmmakers who have sold independent works to Miramax.

Set across the eerie beauty of the Kansas plains, *The Crude Oasis* tells the story of three lost souls whose lives are intertwined in a sensual twist of fate. Jennifer Taylor made her feature film debut as the lonely housewife, Karen Webb. Also starring are Emmy-winner Aaron Shields, formerly of El Dorado, as Karen's cheating husband and Robert Peterson, Butler Community College's theater instructor, as the mysterious man in her disturbing dreams.

Graves made his film independently under the name of Bluestem Films, initially raising the minuscule \$25,000 budget by a letter-writing campaign. The movie was shot in fourteen days

in the El Dorado area. The New York Times, in reviewing the film, said “The best thing about The Crude Oasis is its skill at sustaining an engulfing atmosphere of subtle menace . . . the film depicts the Webb’s well-kept home as a frighteningly empty and sterile void and the neighboring refinery as a sinister, belching monstrosity . . . (It) is wonderful at building up an atmosphere of intrigue and menace.”

Variety cited the film as a hands-down triumph of sheer talent and savvy film craft over limited means, recalling *The Last Picture Show* and *In Cold Blood* in its brooding small-town atmospherics. The article went on to say that the tale full of ingenious twists and turns was all the more satisfying for hinging on believable psychology and nuanced mood, rather than showy plot gimmicks or violence.

With the release of *The Crude Oasis*, doors began to open for Graves. He went on to direct episodes of *Michael Hayes*, *The Practice*, *Ally McBeal*, *Leap of Faith*, *Boston Public*, and ABC’s comedy-drama *Sports Night*.

While working on *Sports Night*, Graves met the show’s creator, Aaron Sorkin, who was already at work on the pilot that would become *The West Wing*. He convinced Graves to direct episodes in the first season of *The West Wing* and ultimately to become a producer of the series, which ran from 1999 to 2006.

“Executive producer” is a title with a broad definition in television, sometimes indicating hands-on involvement in every aspect of a show and sometimes an in-name-only recognition. Graves says he definitely falls in the former camp. “I’m in the writer’s room commenting on the content of episodes,” he says of his role. “I’m in the editing room while the shows are being cut and edited, and I’m on set while it’s being shot.”

Graves, co-executive producer and frequent director of the television political drama, once told Kansas City’s publication, *The Pitch*, “I’ve always felt creatively fulfilled on our show. But certainly, networks don’t tend to be very friendly toward the intellectual considerations that we strive for, since it mostly goes against the current mold of appealing to the lowest common denominator.”

He directed a special live episode of *The West Wing* which aired on November 6, 2005, in which the two presidential candidates met for a televised debate. During the program, the characters made a dramatic decision to toss out strict debate rules and engage in a spontaneous, genuine discussion. Graves rehearsed for two weeks with actors Alan Alda and Jimmy Smits to fine-tune the dense script and explore the notion of two overly-prepared politicians daring each other to risk it all in a real debate.

Graves was nominated for several Emmy awards for directing during the show’s run, as well as receiving two Emmys for producing the top-rated series. While “I certainly never knew it would happen,” he remarked, “I hoped it would, and I worked really hard to make it happen.”

He typically directed between five and eight episodes of the show each season, in addition to his other responsibilities. The series received positive reviews from critics, political science professors, and former White House staffers. Overall, the show won two Golden Globe Awards and 26 Emmy Awards, tying it with Hill Street Blues for the most Emmys ever won by a television drama.

In 1989, a film short, Shelter in the Storm, was released by the University of Southern California School of Cinema and Television, which Alex wrote the screenplay for.

He also wrote the screenplay for Casualties, a direct-to-video release in 1997 that he also directed, starring Mark Harmon. He wrote and sold a new TV series to the Fox network about the New York City Police Department's counterterrorism division.

In November of 2005, Graves returned to the University of Kansas as one of three speakers participating in the Dole Institute of Politics "Hollywood and Politics" lecture series. Using clips from The West Wing, he illustrated how the show was affected by events in real life politics. "The world has changed dramatically since the show started, and as a result, the series has had to change along with it," he told the gathered crowd.

In 2006, Graves became director and executive producer for The Nine, a series about nine survivors of a botched bank robbery who have banded together as an unlikely family, exploring how the event has changed them forever. This idea of people trying to move on out of trauma and do the right thing is part of what attracted Graves to The Nine.

"I thought because the show is about much larger issues in our culture than a bank robbery, the story had to be told on that level. The bank robbery is really a generic for the times we live in. Whether it's 9/11 or . . . your own personal life and things you may be going through, it's really about trying to move on and come together in a difficult time," he said.

Graves is currently working on a new film production scheduled for a 2007 release. The Crusaders, a political drama, is based on Jack Greenberg's memoir of the Civil Rights struggle.

"It's an extremely competitive industry," Alex tells of his work, adding as advice to anyone interested in following the same career path, to "work hard and be persistent."

## AWARDS, RECOGNITION

The West Wing won the Emmy Award for Outstanding Drama Series in 2002 and 2003, with Alex Graves as one of the executive producers. He was also nominated for Outstanding Directing for a Drama Series, The West Wing, in 2002 and 2005. The series also received nominations for Outstanding Drama Series for the consecutive years of 2002 through 2006.

In 2002 and 2005, Graves was awarded the Producers Guild of America (PGA) award for his part in producing The West Wing.

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