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AKRON FILMMAKER WANTS YOU AFRAID OF THE DARK

Filmmaker Randy Shaffer outlines the intensive three-day shoot that culminated in Creaks, a short film premiering at the Akron Independent Horror Short Film Festival October 10, 2026

AKRON, OHIO — September 2, 2026 – No matter the size of the production, there are always fears—fears that the film will go haywire, fears that the cast will revolt, fears that the footage won't come together in the editing room, fears that effects or shots won't look right. And fears that, once everything is all together and working nicely, no one will care.

That is the core of cinema: to take nothing and make something that, if you're lucky, will engage your audience in profound, deep, and even lasting ways. And that's exactly what bestselling author and Akron local filmmaker Randy Shaffer has infused into his latest short work—a horror short entitled *Creaks* which makes its debut at the *Akron Independent Horror Short Film Festival* on October 10, 2026 at the historic Akron Civic Theatre in Akron, Ohio.

The 15-minute short tells the story of internet researcher and occultist YouTuber Martin Bloom as he investigates an online rumor that dark matter is alive—and that it uses abstract sounds to communicate. It isn't long before Martin discovers that some secrets are best left undisturbed, and that it isn't the darkness we should fear, but what comes out of it.

Starring Randy Shaffer himself as Martin Bloom and his wife, Dana Curcio, as a mysterious YouTuber, *Creaks* delves into cosmic horror in ways that will keep you up at night, offering a stark warning that darkness hides even behind your eyes.

Writer/director Randy Shaffer offers, in his own words, a detailed account of the making of *Creaks*, from its humble beginnings to its eventual release in fall 2026. Join him as he discusses the trials, tribulations, insecurities, and ultimate triumphs of low-budget independent filmmaking.

CREAKS, A HAUNTED ORIGIN

Creaks came about because of a furnace.

The living room den of my old house in Stow, Ohio, wasn't very well heated, so a furnace was installed to keep us warm during the winter months. I grew to love that furnace, feeding it firewood on an almost nightly basis in fall and winter. I even became quite the lumberjack in that time, chopping down trees and carving wood like I was Paul Bunyan.

But caring for a furnace like that means you notice when it acts up… or when it pings for no good reason. So when my furnace started pinging and popping during random sparks of emotion, like a deep laugh or even someone crying, I started to ponder the sounds.

My wife and I moved to a new house in Akron, and sounds like these continued there, now in the form of wooden creaks or strange footsteps. Random abstract noises have always fascinated me. Obviously, there's a perfectly logical scientific explanation, likely based on kinetic energy discharge or the friction of an always-moving house. A big laugh likely shakes the walls, so like a back on a human stretching, that sound will release as a creak or a crack as it effectively dissipates charge.

But that doesn't always explain why it only happens… sometimes.

To find more answers, I found myself digging into dark matter and dark energy on NASA's own website, where the mystery only deepened. I conflate the two for the purposes of the film, but both dark matter and dark energy exist as a bit of a scientific paradox that confounds even the most scholarly of physicists.

Dark matter (and dark energy) make up roughly 95% of the known universe, and yet we literally don't know what the hell it even is! When my character, Martin Bloom, unveils those facts, I'm as flabbergasted as he is.

To know that something exists everywhere, even inside our own bodies, and we have no damn clue what it is—that scared me. And that fear has continued to brew for literally half a decade.

I made *Creaks* to rationalize that fear; that deep sense of dread I have not for the dark, but for what could exist inside of it. Most of what Martin says in the film is true—at least the facts he spouts about dark matter. The more real the science felt, the more I felt a deepening escalation of horror, and the more audiences responded when I'd test the story with friends and colleagues.

Armed with a great concept, I set my sights on shooting the week of May 25th, 2026. But like all productions, things didn't exactly go as planned.

PRE-PRODUCTION: INFECTIOUS COMPLICATIONS

Admittedly, the first delay wasn't sickness but a neighbor who had taken to late-night excavating in order to finish a garden project in time for summer. The driving around and digging up of his backyard wasn't very loud or annoying, but it picked up on all my mics, forcing me to delay the shoot into June.

I figured, what else could go wrong, right? Right?!

Is it TMI to admit I got an infection that nearly killed me? What started as knee pain transformed into a months-long battle to survive. The pain felt mostly ordinary at first. I contacted a doctor and got a prescription for a steroid to knock it out. But then nothing seemed to improve. My knee pain persisted, and my groin and back pain were increasing. They got so bad that I stopped being able to walk. Bedridden, I started to panic that I was actually going to die.

It didn't help that doctors were whispering of cancer, as well as organ removal and intensive surgeries that would require months of recovery—all as the film festival circuit would be getting underway. My dreams were evaporating. I was distraught.

My wife and I host a regular movie night each week. I usually collect a cadre of 10–15 strange cult films and hidden gems and allow my friends to choose from these picks. I love sharing movies with people; their reactions are like jet fuel to me. I yearn for movie night!

But this movie night felt different. I had just discussed cancer with my wife and doctor. My sister passed from colon cancer around my age, so the prospect of dying suddenly became very real to me. So real, in fact, I could feel something, like a chemical being injected in my brain—the kind of chemical that only gets released when you really, truly think your days are numbered.

That whole night felt like a capsule in time. I cherished the laughs we shared. I soaked it all in. In that moment, it truly felt like one of the last things I'd ever do.

The turning point wouldn't come for several days and a few more doctor visits, until they eventually narrowed the problem down to an infection that had spread like wildfire with the introduction of a steroid. I received a shot that felt like getting a full tattoo all at once and was sent on my way.

It would be almost a month until I'd feel normal again. And even at the time of this article, I can barely run—an activity I did daily before the infection took hold. I can still feel the pain of that

infection when I overexert myself. I still get winded. And I can still feel how it damaged my body in ways that took me to the brink of death.

But as I recovered, I felt a need to get back to work, and with a vengeance. With festival deadlines rapidly approaching, I dove into *Creaks* and got the script shoot-ready. Armed with some newfound trauma from that recovery, I infused the short with some of my experiences.

Alas, all planning from May and June had to be scrapped, including casting two actors for the roles of Martin Bloom and a mysterious YouTuber known as darkmatterconscience237. So I sat my wife, Dana Curcio, down and walked her through what we were gonna do. Inspired by the can-do spirit of filmmakers Werner Herzog and David Lynch, we were gonna film *Creaks* using whatever we had, however we could.

After all, art doesn't give a shit about what materials you've got. If art wants to exist, it will exist… planning be damned.

DAY ONE: IS THIS EVEN WORKING?

Making a film is always tough. Making one in essentially one night is like taking down a prizefighter while blindfolded. It beats you up in ways you didn't know were possible. It's an emotional experience. Things don't go right. You get frustrated. You sweat. You yell. You feel the intensity of the art as it comes into form, like a pressure cooker. And with time running out, every blown second is a missed opportunity to shoot something valuable, something necessary.

Each time I go in front of the camera and shoot a take, I finish by thinking something like, "Well, that didn't f**king work."

It's wild how I always thought I'd know that something worked, but you really don't. You know it *might* work. That's it! That's the best you can get, and anyone who says otherwise is lying, or can see the future, so ask them which stocks you should buy.

The truth of it is, it's nearly impossible to tell if a scare is going to work in the moment because the thing that's scaring the character isn't actually there. Sure, I can muster up real fear, even sweat and tears, but does it come across as authentic? Is the big, bad, scary monster actually scaring you as much as it's scaring my character?

Thousands of questions, thoughts, and fears swell and swirl through my head with each take, including panic that one of my cats will suddenly decide to yowl, botching a full minute or two of footage. Additional creaks in the house are adding authentic scares, many of which made it into the final cut of the film. But other intrusions are less than desirable.

It's raining the night I shoot *Creaks*. That would be a hindrance to some productions, but for my production, it was the exact catalyst to drive the film's ominous, looming threat. I leaned into the rain and added more of it in post.

My wife went off to her mother's house. I like to shoot my scenes alone, if only because it reduces the risk of additional sounds. But it also gives me the freedom to live in the art; to make it as real as I can, and to play around with what the scenes mean to my character.

Readying a house for a micro-budget production requires shutting off anything that makes noise, and I mean anything! You will be shocked by how noisy a silent house can be when you need to shoot. Even a small light can emit a creeping buzz.

I shot *Creaks* with an iPhone so that the look and feel of the final film would appear authentic to the YouTube-style format Martin Bloom was filming in. Shooting this way meant I could use the iPhone's shockingly good microphone for center-channel audio. But that means no other sounds, or as little sound as possible, can be present when filming.

It would also mean that I could play around with the shooting format's compression and lighting settings in order to further disorient the viewer, alarming them as darkness takes over the frame. In fact, I started the film off with a splash of Dario Argento/Mario Bava-inspired color, but intentionally made each scene darker than the next so that darkness literally surrounds Martin as the story progresses. This culminates in the library scene, where I want the audience to almost reach out in order to move away the compression artifacts that are distorting their view.

Alas, despite all the planning, by the middle of shooting, I was scared. I texted Dana that the film wasn't working and that my night was becoming a bust. I was depressed. I was losing confidence that I was capturing what I saw in my head. With such a breakneck shooting pace, I wasn't sure I was building suspense or just boring the audience with a Mister Wizard-style science lecture about dark matter. Worse, my back was hurting—my infection reminding me that it was still there.

During a shoot, big or small, it's hard to know if you're getting the material that means the most. You could assume it's the big scenes. Action. Drama. Scares. A fight. A shouting match. But films are like magic tricks. It's about what you don't see. It's about how the trick is set up. If those pieces work, the action works. The drama works. The scare works.

With *Creaks*, I was shooting so many of Martin's non-scary scenes, and so many takes of each scene, that it all started to feel like a lecture. A fumbling one at that.

I scanned the footage and found what *might* work. The takes were better than I thought. In fact, it seemed like I got it. But that would all depend on the scares—the next part of filming.

I excel at reacting to the unseen and find that my best acting foot is put forward when getting scared or emotional. And the second half of this shoot was much easier as a result. Takes were

coming out cleaner. Scares were fueled by real anxiety. And beats were changed on the spot to enhance jumps.

A library closet scare, for example, was originally scripted to feature nothing but a creepy voice. But a last-minute idea led to what is easily one of the bigger frights in the film—Martin coming face-to-face with a figure in the closet. That figure, oddly enough, was actually a cardboard standee of Tom Cruise I got for a party. He is wearing a pre-*Scream* vintage Ghostface mask that's been turned around. When Martin says it was a Halloween decoration, he's not joking. I used that as a prop for a Halloween segment of another film I shot, *Save for Death*, that should release in the next year or so.

Getting the scares right also meant getting physical, as one jump in the film required me to fall down my home's steps—something I was nervous to do following my infection. But I figured I can't make it worse, so I took the fall. My knees weren't happy, but the shot looks great.

In fact, it looked so good, I started to feel the movie come together… like watching ice cream form. And by the end of the shoot, I could feel my confidence return. The scares were working, so much so that when I cut power in my house to film the finale, I kept getting goosebumps on my skin. The darkness was actually spooking me!

As I finished the final take, I felt a sense of success. It was there. At least, it *might* be there. I got the whole film, my part of it. The last take was done in total darkness. So fitting to finish the film in the very dark matter that inspired the short film in the first place. I welcomed a creak from upstairs in that moment, even if it did scare the hell out of me!

DAY TWO: ENTER DARKMATTERCONSCIENCE237

Dana wasn't an actor. She reminded me of that whenever I'd ask if she wanted to take on this role. I didn't really want an actor. I wanted someone who would seem awkward in front of a camera and come across as real and authentic. Someone who looked like they'd never even thought of doing a YouTube channel. I saw Dana.

She enjoyed acting, but the confidence to do it wasn't quite there. She wanted guidance, more than I was used to for myself as an actor. But guidance is what a director provides, so I took up the challenge with glee.

I pointed Dana to several YouTubers and TikTokers who matched both the style and cadence of what I was trying to achieve with her scenes. She was struggling to understand her character, so she and I went to dinner and had about an hour's worth of discussion until she had a firm grip on her character's history and motives. And after watching a few videos, she understood how she should sound.

We set up our bedroom to look different from Martin's sets (Martin never goes into his bedroom in his scenes on purpose) and lit the scene with white LED lights and diffusers to give Dana's scenes a distinctly different look and feel, more akin to an Instagram filter, but with small accents of science nerd.

Because her footage was supposed to be from 2018, we decided to use my laptop's camera and internal microphone so that the footage would look and feel a little dated, not to mention different from Martin's higher-quality iPhone footage.

As when I shot my own scenes, Dana would send me off while she filmed her takes. I told her to do this so she would feel the freedom to explore her character without the pressure of looming eyes. This allowed her to experiment with different takes and different tones until she locked in on a specific cadence and speaking style that matched her character, who was likely a teacher before the story started.

Roughly 90 minutes and more than twenty takes later, Dana had her first scene down.

With that scene in the can, we geared up and ventured to a parking garage in the Akron area to film her second, more pivotal moment.

This would be a dramatic scene for Dana. She's meant to be scared and alone. She's witnessed serious trauma, and it lingers with her character constantly. And worse, the darkness is actively out to get her. All these elements had to feel real. Dana's character needed to feel like she was imprisoned. Thankfully, a parking garage provides such a desolate setting.

Despite her fears about delivering an emotional punch, Dana was able to film this scene in much less time than her character's intro. Drawing inspiration from loss and traumas in her own life, Dana transforms her affable, nerdy science teacher into a woman who is shattered and barely holding herself together. Combined with several notable sound effects added in post-production, the scene becomes a harrowing account of a woman mere hours, if not minutes, from meeting her end. The way her voice quivers and shakes—it's exactly how Dana reacts when she really is scared. It's a terrifying beat.

There was only one problem—an error in the cloud had corrupted everything she and I had shot that night. As I scanned through all the footage on my phone, I was shocked and heartbroken to learn that literally none of the audio matched the video. Every second. Every take. All gone.

And suddenly, we were thrust back to square one. Or were we?

As it turned out, a syncing error was the culprit behind the mismatched audio, and all the takes of Dana's performance were salvaged. We were saved.

With all her scenes officially in the can, and my scenes filmed the night before, we were finally ready to edit *Creaks* and see if that "*might* work" would be turned into *"does* work."

DAY THREE: EDITING AND MIXING

I am at home in front of an editing bay. I love editing. I love color. I love mixing sound. I even kinda love coming up with film scores. I've had a fascination with film and sound since an early age. I'd record plays, audio dramas, and movies I wanted to one day make, acting out all the roles and sound effects myself on a brown-and-beige Fisher-Price tape recorder. In fact, as I edited, I decided to sample some audio from one of those tapes for a sound effect in *Creaks*. I also mined those tapes and found a 1979 recording from my late sister that became a focal point of the film's final scares.

My editing friends have long called me a maestro in the editing bay. A friend used to spend hours mulling one take over another, while in that same time I'd have my complete edit ready. Editing is second nature to me, and bringing a story into focus is so fun—like the ultimate puzzle. I even edit movies for fun in my free time!

Even before sound and visual effects, *Creaks* was coming together quite nicely. With just the dialogue and minimal sound effects, and no score, the film was already starting to work. I had filmed a great deal of the movie's visual effects in-camera, including a rather tricky scene in which horses in a mirror are no longer there in the final shots—a beat that required a lot of staging to pull off. Computer effects and generative tools were also used, but only for four small instances, as *Creaks* didn't need those types of VFX tools to pull off its scares. Rather, sound effects were the real heart of *Creaks*, and in order to make the film feel real, over 530 sound effects were used in the film. These ranged from simple things like a microwave or a creak, to complex sounds like living darkness surrounding the viewer.

Many sound effects and creaks were designed specifically for this film, built using a myriad of real effects and other sound tools that, when mixed, make unnatural or unearthly sounds. Hundreds of techniques were employed in order to give the film a unique sound presence that feels both organic and spooky.

The film's score was created using out-of-tune instruments and sound effects. I wanted the score to feel simple and effective without being the full driving force of fear. Rather, the score acts as an atmospheric undertone to the film's creeping dread. My personal favorite track is the film's finale, which utilizes violins to an amazing degree. I literally play it in my car while driving.

Once I had a locked stereo mix for *Creaks*, I began the long process of rebuilding the film with 5.1 surround sound in mind. Of course, I didn't know how to do this at first, but being autodidactic has its benefits, so I learned my way through the process using both trial and error and A LOT of online tutorials.

Building a 5.1 mix means taking every single sound effect and deciding which channel those sounds should come out of. Should a sound effect emerge from the left or right? Should it pan across the front channels, or from front to back? Or vice versa? Or all together? After answering

these questions, I also had to build out stems for the film's score, which would be used for rear surrounds and panning effects.

Once sound effects were separated and mixed into the proper channels, it was time to test the film in my own prosumer home theater. The first few versions were good, but not aggressive enough, so new mixes were made that enhanced front and rear surround effects.

In fact, I was quite happy with the mix until I watched Zach Cregger's film *Barbarian* that evening. *Barbarian*'s Atmos mix is so good, it haunts me. It also inspired me to return to my mix and amp up rear effects to increase immersion.

The end result was one you could feel. I had been testing the film on several friends, and all of them noted a significant improvement after I remixed the audio following my viewing of *Barbarian*. You can thank that film for inspiring the final mix of *Creaks*!

CREAKS, A REALITY AT LAST

I am never done with a movie. Even now, there are cuts and things I'd tweak if I had more time. Hell, there are cuts and tweaks I'd make to my first short film I made over twenty years ago. But once you lock a movie and turn it in to film festivals, that's it. It's done.

Creaks was my baby. A fast baby. But a cared-for darling nonetheless. I poured my heart and soul into this film. I wrote it. I shot it. I acted in it. I edited it. I scored it. I mixed it. I made a surround mix. I did the color. I even put together the DCP. *Creaks* is wholly mine, the product of an artist who thought his days were numbered and poured every bit of his creative being into making a film that should, if I am so very lucky, thrill and enthrall horror lovers, and maybe even inspire a feature-length adaptation.

Even now, I know *Creaks* works. I've shown it to dozens of friends and colleagues. I've gotten their feedback. I've made amendments before locking the picture. The film actually scares me, especially when watched in total darkness on a screen capable of True Black.

But like I said, it *might* work.

I won't truly know until wider audiences lay eyes on the film and experience it for themselves. That's always a scary part.

But then I'm reminded that cinema is best when there's real fear behind it—a sort of desperation that breeds both ingenuity and a must-watch quality. I have no idea if *Creaks* is that film. But I know one thing: I can't stop watching it. I just hope audiences will feel the same. And if they do… thank you ahead of time. It means the world to me.

And if not, I'll see you next year because I am in no way done. Once you make one film, you get the taste. And that thirst never lets up.

ABOUT RANDY SHAFFER

Randy Shaffer is a filmmaker, screenwriter, author, photographer, sound designer and marketing professional whose career has included work for **IGN, SeaWorld, Six Flags, Cedar Fair** and **Cutri Photo Arts**. He currently owns a freelance marketing and filmmaking business and creates short-form film content for **Clorox/Purell** social media platforms. He is the author of the bestselling short story ***The Horror*** and is currently working on a novelization for international rap artist **R.A. the Rugged Man**. His first feature-length film, **Save for Death**, is currently in post-production. He is also working on his next horror short, ***Bedridden***.

FILM DETAILS: *Creaks* | Suspense / Thriller / Supernatural / Horror / Found Footage / Cosmic Horror | 15 minutes, 19 seconds | United States | English | 4K | 16:9 | DCP Available | Completed August 14, 2026 | Production Budget: $500

CREDITS: Written & Directed by Randy Shaffer | Produced by Randy Shaffer and Dana Curcio | Executive Producer: Jake Richardson | Starring Randy Shaffer and Dana Curcio | Music, Sound Design, Sound FX Mixing & Visual Effects: Randy Shaffer, Score by Randy Shaffer

MEDIA & FESTIVAL INQUIRIES: Randy Shaffer, Writer / Director / Producer — *Creaks*. Press materials, screening links, interviews and festival information available upon request.

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