



## With three Avenue Video locations, the Curious Case of Michael Taylor has him working behind the counter for the very first time

Two blocks west from where we publish *Hollywood@home* in West-End Montreal, stands the venerable **Avenue Video** rental store that has been a mainstay of our community since 1986. “At one point, the Avenue Video chain encompassed about 20 stores,” says **Michael Taylor**, who resuscitated the moniker when, at the age of 31, he invested \$30,000 to purchase the VHS catalog and entire contents of a bankrupt video store in order to satisfy his addiction to film. “While there was only one Avenue Video location that survived the ‘90s, I thought it would be a great time to start one up myself, albeit with a different business model.”

Although he felt that his new 3,000 square foot store in the bedroom community of Montreal West would be more of a hobby than his key to financial independence, Mike quickly realized that he liked the life of a video store owner.

With the support of his wife and young family, he slowly let go of his previous career as a freelance web designer in order to concentrate on transforming Avenue Video into the premiere destination for young families and film buffs in the area. “After four years as a stand-alone store, I finally convinced the owner of the remaining Avenue Video to let me buy into his store, and last summer, I jumped at the opportunity start up a third Avenue Video location,” says Taylor. “While I compete with a handful of chain stores in the vicinity, my three outlets now have the economies of scale to really make an impact in the community. I guess I’m on a mission to revolutionize the home entertainment industry in the area, one neighbourhood at a time!”

### A LIFELONG MOVIE FANATIC

Taylor’s father—a British engineer by trade—moved his family, including 3-year old Mike, to London, Ontario from London, England in 1972, to work at Northern Telecom. “I always believed that I was Canadian,” says Mike. “It was only when I was 17 when a U.S. customs agent looked me up in the system after a ski trip across the border that I was told that I wasn’t actually a citizen, and so I had to attend a group meeting and do a citizenship test to get my dual passport,” he laughs. “To be honest, my dad was a rugby player and I was taught how to play cricket as a kid instead of hockey, so maybe I needed those lessons after all!”

By the age of 10, Taylor was in for more culture shock when his dad was transferred to the Quebec South Shore enclave of St-Lambert, over the bridge from Montreal. “I did well in school, at least in the subjects that interested

me,” he recalls. “But I was always told that I was a lazy student, and when my folks and younger brother left for Calgary in 1980 after another transfer, I was sent to boarding school in Oakville, Ontario—an old time British-model upper crust high school—in order to get some motivation in my life. I didn’t really excel in anything, but I got through my latin classes, played a lot of soccer, and even became the dormitory prefect, in

charge of the new video cassette recorder that was the cornerstone of our living space.”

It was a JVC top-loading VCR and at the ripe old age of 14, Michael Taylor knew his life would never be the same. “Across the street from the school was ‘the Dew’—a variety store ridiculously named the ‘Dew Dropin’ that rented the first VHS tapes out on the market. “I would go to the Dew every day and rent *Excalibur* or *Risky Business*

or whatever they had available. If it had any nudity, we would rent it twice or three times a week!”

Once his folks returned from Alberta, and the family was reunited in the West Island of Montreal, Michael started Junior College in order to follow in his dad’s footsteps as an engineer. “That didn’t go so well,” he laughs. “But I did take some great film history classes and became enthralled by classic cinema. I would watch *Apocalypse Now* and *Eraserhead* during class, then go see *Mona Lisa* and *My Beautiful Laundrette* at the local rep cinema, before renting the latest **John Woo** laserdisc at **Chez Moovie**, our local video store. Thinking back, I always wanted to own that place!”

### TURNING A PASSION INTO A CAREER

So he switched to computer science (“That was the easiest degree to get”) and his adolescence was defined by his quest for Asian cinema and his natural skill with high tech. By the mid-1990’s, he was scratching out a living in his own multimedia company, while living with his future wife **Kimberly**. “We would rent movies at Avenue Video—they had an amazing catalog of titles because they’d been there so long,” recalls Mike. “After my dad passed away, I heard that a competing store wanted to liquidate his stock, and with Kim’s permission, I spent my inheritance and bought the contents of his store in order to start my own. I think Kim knew I was going to spend all of my money on movies anyway, so at least this way I could actually make a living at it!”

He had never worked a day in a video store, but in November 2000, Michael Taylor opened his 2,500 square-foot Avenue Video in Montreal West (“there

was no competition and it was a great location”) and learned first hand that retail is much more than a hobby. “It cost me a lot more than I budgeted, and there were city bylaws that I had not expected. We had to be open 70 hours a week, and I would get mad when my favourite films would gather dust on my shelves!” But his community embraced him, and when he signed up his 1,000th member and rang up \$120,000 in rental income in that first year, Mike ditched his web design business in order to make a name for Avenue Video within the area.

By the fourth year, having increased sales to \$200,000, Mike convinced the owner of the other Avenue Video to let him buy a stake into the location as well. He closed down the store for a week, and spent \$25,000 on do-it-yourself renovations, replacing the Gridrax shelving with custom bookcases in order to give it a home library feel. Instead of buying 3–5 copies of a title on DVD, he increased orders to 18–25 and went on a fact-finding mission to understand his new neighbourhood. “My first store targeted young families and has an older English clientele,” he says. “But the new location is in a more multi-cultural area with a greater appreciation for quality cinema.” In September 2004, the store was re-opened and had a 20% increase in business that day from a year earlier. Mike doubled the new store’s membership in that first year.

### REDEFINING HOME ENTERTAINMENT

In July of 2008, Mike got news that another store in the area was for sale, and a month later, the third Avenue Video—a larger emporium that included a basement filled with boxes of Beta tapes and memorabilia—became his newest challenge. “I never had to work the counter in the other stores because the community took to us so quickly,” said Taylor. “But 4,000 square feet is a lot of space and costs a lot more in rent, so I’ve decided to go back to basics and meet and greet my new customers and learn about what they want from our store.”

Now with three locations, Mike is making his mark. His Halloween costume contests for **Unicef** and Thanksgiving Food Drives have gotten him some good press, and he is on the lookout for sponsorship opportunities to get Avenue Video’s name known in the community. “My sons are 5 and 8 years old, and starting to play hockey in town, so I’d love to have our name on their uniforms,” he laughs.

In an age where people are looking for instant gratification, easy access to information, and where ‘must-have-now’ attitudes abound, Mike is looking to integrate globalization, technology and convenience into his stores while still maintaining that neighbourhood feel. “Over the next 18 months, Avenue Video will be bringing the home entertainment experience to a whole new level,” he promises. “Quite simply, we want to cultivate a diverse film community in the areas we serve. Instead of thinking outside the box, we’re thinking *inside* the box!”



Avenue Video's Mike Taylor has parlayed a lifelong love of cinema into a new career as a video retailer.