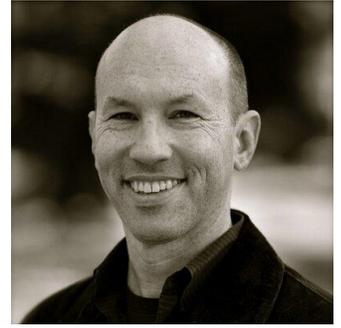


PRINCIPAL FOCUS

Getting to Know Principal Michael McAlister

(Part 1 of 3)



What can you tell us about your childhood and formative years growing up here in the east bay?

I grew up in nearby Lafayette and graduated from Acalanes High in 1983. I loved my school experience but when I wasn't in the classroom I was either in the pool, in the ocean or on my skateboard. Somethings don't change. I went to UC Berkeley where I majored in history and participated in theater whenever I could. As you might imagine, my parents were very disappointed when I decided to put law school on hold and go to New York to join a fledgling theater company.

Is it true you have a background in theater and improv? Tell us about that.

It is true. I had this great apartment in East Harlem that I shared with two other college friends. While they worked on Wall Street, I tended bar, and spent a fair amount of time on stage. On a dare, I started doing some stand-up comedy and decided my prospects were good enough to move back to California where the opportunities, at that time, were still pretty decent for fairly funny guys with receding hairlines. Those were some good years. I was nearly penniless but I made life-long friendships and wouldn't trade the experiences, both on stage and off, for anything.

Rumor has it you were in a few TV commercials. What was that like?

Also true. I did a few ads which paid really well. One of them, Burger King, went national and helped me payoff the last of my student loans. All I had to do for that commercial was eat about ten pounds of this new product called Chicken Tenders over the course of three days. That was awful, but the trade off, aside from the nice paycheck, was that I was cast opposite this stunning actress and the director kept having us kiss. She was much taller so while it was awkward, I remember feeling like I'd won the Karmic lottery. Here I am, this goofy guy with glasses and more than a little hair loss, standing on a milk crate to compensate for my height, smooching this model. I felt like I had truly arrived. Charmed life, right?

At some point you made the shift from acting to teaching. How did that transpire?

Yes, I was actually sitting on this part of Mulholland Drive one night overlooking a rare, crystal-clear LA skyline after a pretty tough set at the Melrose Improv. It's a tough room on the best of nights but I had to follow this guy who was horrible and I couldn't get the jaded audience back. The audience was just dead. Crickets. After the set, up on Mulholland, I was realizing how unhappy I was with how things were going professionally. I was getting great exposure and cool auditions, and being an actor was pretty fun but, this sounds so cliché, it all felt like a lot of vanity. Every part of life was, for my friends and me, about the success of our last set, or the part we scored in the upcoming Dr. Pepper commercial. It felt empty. Something shifted looking at that skyline that night. I decided that I wanted to do something else. As fate would have it, the very next morning, I got a call from my 8th grade history teacher. He and I'd kept in touch over the years and he explained how he had just been diagnosed with late-stage pancreatic cancer and needed a long term substitute for his students at Stanley Middle School. Oddly, this was the very school I'd attended fifteen years earlier. I figured it was a sign. I walked into my old classroom and took over for my old friend who died shortly thereafter. I taught 8th grade US history at Stanley for three years, then got a job teaching psychology and AP government at another alma mater, Acalanes High, for sixteen more years. I then moved to Miramonte as an Associate Principal and after a very short stint at Las Lomas, I came here to Northgate.

You also spent time training as a Zen monk in Tibet and Thailand. Can you elaborate? What did you take from that experience and how does it apply to your life today?

I was always interested in the idea of life's deeper questions, but, truth be told, my Zen training started because of a crush I had on a girl. She invited me to attend a meditation out at Green Gulch Farm Zen Center in Marin. While nothing ever came of that crush, my fascination with sitting still and being quiet only intensified. After about ten years, I took a one-year leave from my job at Acalanes and studied with forest monks in Thailand and Tibetan exiles in the Himalayas. It was amazing. I came home, got married, wrote a book, had a couple of daughters and plugged right back into life but was able to look at things through a different lens. I still do. Every day is so precious.

How do you unwind and enjoy life away from work? What would you like to share about your personal life?

I'm pretty passionate about surfing. There is something so magical about a set of waves in the early morning. It always reminds me of how celebratory life can be. I've especially enjoyed sharing this with my seven and nine year-old girls as they've gotten older. I just feel so lucky to be here. I feel lucky to always feel like there's more to learn. I feel lucky to be at Northgate, surrounded by great people who are committed to great things. It's like I get to keep winning the Karmic Lottery.