

THE HARBINGER



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THE BLUE KNIGHT RISES



Associate principal John McKinney has taken long road to his appointment as East's 2013-14 principal

►written by Matt Hanson

Associate principal John McKinney sits at his desk talking to a student about her pursuit of a degree in music. He asks her questions about her test scores, her grades, which schools she's applied to. He wants to know what she wants to do after college. He listens intently to her answers, trying to figure out how he can help her get what she wants in life.

McKinney lives for meetings like this. They're the reason he became a teacher. And then an associate principal. And, starting next year, East's new principal. He considers it his purpose in life to help students realize their own. But McKinney hasn't always known his purpose. He's taken a circuitous road to fulfillment, to his home here in the third floor administrative office of Shawnee Mission East.

Growing up, McKinney never thought he'd be a teacher. He never thought he'd be a principal. In fact, he only had one plan in mind: to work in a factory at the Iowa Beef Processors plant, the largest employer in his hometown of Emporia. It was what everyone he knew would do.

"I never considered anything other than just working for the beef," McKinney said. "I had very simple goals. I just wanted to live a very simple life in a small town with friends. No big goals. I was going to work for the beef and that was that."

But when McKinney finally applied to work for the beef, he wasn't hired. His life plan deferred, he enlisted in the Army shortly after and was sent to Fort Wainwright, Ala. for infantry training. After four years in the army, McKinney decided to go to college. So at the age of 21, he enrolled in Northern Arizona University, where McKinney pursued a degree in psychology with a plan to become a marriage counselor. Having seen his mom divorce multiple times, he thought he could connect with people affected by divorce. But one day, while sitting in a practice couples session, McKinney had an epiphany.

"I thought to myself, 'There is no way in the world I can spend the rest of my life listening to people complain about sort of trivial, insignificant [matters],'" McKinney said.

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So in the middle of his junior year at Northern Arizona, McKinney dropped out entirely and landed a job in nearby Phoenix with a new company called Sprint. He spent a few years in Phoenix before being transferred to Kansas City. There, McKinney found a comfortable salary, a stable job as a customer service supervisor and even got married. He had already accomplished so much more than he ever thought he would.

But something was still missing. McKinney began to want more from his career. Days of listening to customers gripe about their service were taking a toll on him. Then he looked at his wife, Shazon, who would come home every day excited from her job as a first grade teacher.

"I said, 'I want that,'" McKinney said. "I want to work with kids. I want to help them get ready for the future. I want to feel good about what I'm doing."

So McKinney went and finished his degree, this time in English, at Ottawa University. Then, with his degree and a teaching certificate in hand, McKinney made a decision that changed his life indefinitely: he left Sprint. He left his stable job. He left his good company. He left his benefits, and his 401k, and his nice salary, and began his career as an English teacher.

"It was scary leaving Sprint," McKinney said. "But I knew that I needed something more. At that point in my life I had developed goals and aspirations beyond just 'work till you die.' I knew that I wanted to do something meaningful and significant and important."

McKinney's leap of faith paid off, and not just because he's now slated to become the next principal of one of the top public high schools in Kansas. His decision to leave Sprint has been justified by more than just his profession-

al success as an educator. McKinney found his purpose in teaching. He knows he was meant to do this. And his success as an educator shows that.

McKinney came to East for the 2000-2001 school year as an English teacher. In his first decade at East, McKinney gradually made his way towards an administrative position. He became the head of the English department, took on extra responsibility for the district and began taking classes for administration. His first class was taught by a man who has become McKinney's mentor and friend during his past five years as an administrator: Principal Karl Krawitz.

The two men formed a teacher-student bond during that class. But when both were hired to the East administration the next year, they were given an opportunity to further develop that relationship.

"That's one of the things you have to do with this job," Dr. Krawitz said. "You're never gonna do it forever. It's been a constant mentoring."

But Dr. Krawitz thinks McKinney is ready now, and McKinney agrees. He says he's been preparing for this job for the last five years as an associate principal. He's wanted to be a building principal for a while now, and there's no other place he'd rather do that than East.

"I think that I found in the students here at East a commitment to learning, a desire to do something with their lives, a confidence that if they are given the tools and the knowledge they need they can go off and do these really incredible things," McKinney said. "And that's the culture here at East. I fell in love with that."

Just as McKinney fell in love with East, the East community has come to love him over time.

"He's a fun guy and he seems to have a humorous per-

sonality," junior Quincy Hendricks said. "Everyone respects him."

McKinney has developed a good reputation with the faculty here, as well.

"He was one of the first people I met when I was hired here, and I liked him from the moment I met him," English teacher Lisa Leslie said. "We shared the same philosophy. We both believe very much that connection with the students is key to everything else happening."

McKinney contributes his success at East to his ability to work with people. While he may have a very different background than the students he works with here, he always finds ways to find commonality with them.

"Whatever the differences might be, I've tried really hard to see the common ground between people and find something that we might have in common to talk about," McKinney said. "For me to have conversations with freshmen who are 14 years old, I've got to really try to have something in common that [I] can talk about and use as a means to get to know that person better."

McKinney has come to help students fulfill their potential. He has a knack for spotting potential in students who don't see it in themselves — in part because he never saw it in himself.

"I think because I lived that, where I wasn't particularly goal-oriented, but now that's a big part of my life, I encourage others to see beyond right now and to look toward the future and all the potential that they have in them and to become the person that I feel like they could become," McKinney said.



STEPPING UP

Associate Principal will take the position of principal next year

►photo by Jake Crandall

Above: Associate principal John McKinney supervises student section at the East vs. SM South basketball game.