



WHERE MY DEGREE TAKES ME: A PROFILE OF ALFRED MCALISTER, PhD
By LEE KELLY

In eastern Finland's rural towns of Illomantsi and Joensuu, the winter temperatures dip to 45 degrees below zero. There, for 15 years, Alfred McAlister, PhD, stayed months at a time, helping lead a pioneering community health promotion project.

The North Karelia Project successfully reduced heart attack rates by more than 70 percent.

In the suffocating heat of the United States/Mexican border areas of Eagle Pass and Brownsville, McAlister promoted smoking cessation in low income neighborhoods on both sides of the border.

The project succeeded in doubling the verified long term quitting rates among heavy smokers.



Fall 2009 ... Alfred McAlister sits at his desk 5:30 in the morning in his South Austin home office overlooking a spring-fed pool on Williamson Creek. As daylight brightens the sky, he can watch hawks, herons, deer, and the occasional coyote.

"I love Austin and the Hill Country because this is where I'm from and who I am," he says. "I am a South Austin--Hill Country progressive 'redneck' with enough indigenous blood and sense to mix as easily with Mexicans as with my own culture."



Professor Alfred McAlister, 61, an applied social psychologist, also is considered one of the pioneers in tobacco control research.

He is a professor of behavioral sciences at the University of Texas School of Public Health--Austin Regional Campus (UT-SPH-ARC).

Cheryl Perry, PhD, is its dean. She also is a professor there, and was a research assistant for Professor McAlister at Stanford University. Currently she is the Senior Scientific Editor of the U.S. Surgeon General's 2010 Report on Tobacco.

Says Perry of McAlister, "He was one of the very first to be able to think about, and make a difference in, tobacco use among teens and adults."

McAlister's accomplishments in this field are numerous.

Two he considers especially important:

- McAlister led the development and initial testing of the American Cancer Society's Quitline, which provides services to smokers, specifically telephone cessation counseling. It has served more than 400,000 callers since it began in May 2000, says McAlister.
- In 2001 in Jefferson County in Southeast Texas, McAlister and Philip Huang, M.D., led anti-tobacco activities that reduced smoking rates by more than 1/3rd and prevented hundreds of heart attacks. Dr. Huang now is the medical director of the Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department.



Professor McAlister journeyed a circuitous path to his position at ARC.

His late mother, June Marie Gallessich, PhD, was "the great influence in my early life."

She was a respected Jungian analyst and a president of the Texas Psychological Association. Later in life she married Robert Reiff PhD, a nationally prominent psychologist. The late Professor Reiff also helped shape his stepson's ideas about how psychology can influence community health.

Professor McAlister recalls when he was nine years old, his mother took him on a tour of Stanford University. "And she told me 'this is the kind of place where you should go to college.'"

At age 12, he brought home from the local library a volume of Freud's writings. He asked his mother about an essay on atheism. "She encouraged me to be inquiring and to read Freud," even though he was being raised "in a strict Baptist home by compassionate liberals," he says.

Later, the college student wanted to drop out of UT-Austin his sophomore year, but his mother persuaded him to continue with the promise of paying his tuition.

One year later, wanderlust and the lure of a more exciting life led him to drop out after his junior year.

He traveled and tested his talents as a songwriter and musician "like my hero Bob Dylan." After deciding he lacked sufficient talent, he supported himself off and on as a sound engineer and music promoter. No doubt he was influenced here by his father, Raphael Lee McAlister, a country western music promoter and radio broadcaster, now of Irving, Tx. (These days, McAlister and his father talk almost weekly, his son says).

Professor McAlister also dreamed of becoming a fiction writer "and I may yet pursue that," he says today.

And his lifelong love of fishing, especially fly fishing, led him to consider -- but reject -- a job offer as a steelhead trout fishing guide in Gold River, British Columbia.

After two years of the nomad's life, McAlister says, "I wanted to go back and become a highly educated person, like my mother who had gone back and gotten her PhD" (at age 43) at UT-Austin.

McAlister graduated from UT-Austin in 1972 with a Bachelors of Science degree in psychology.



Fate sometimes steps in, or chance, changing our dreams and goals, altering our lives.

So it was for Alfred McAlister.

The seeds for his prominence in the tobacco control field were planted at Stanford University where he spent five years of pre-and -post doctoral training in applied psychology and preventive medicine.

McAlister was on fellowship his first year and studied and researched an area that had interested him since childhood.

In his second year he was named a research assistant -- and was told what to study.

It was one of the most important facts of life that he learned at Stanford, and that today he teaches to his own students.

" ' SCIENCE is spelled MONEY, ' " says McAlister, quoting his principal advisor, the late Nathan "Mac" Maccoby, PhD.

Professor Maccoby told McAlister to research tobacco control ---or else.

"I was not very excited," says McAlister, who quit smoking at age 21. "And I reiterated my desire to study" in another area "and was told there would be no 'real' grant money (in that area) for at least 25 years.

"Mac then said something like 'there will be an enormous amount of research money going into chronic disease prevention and tobacco will be a big topic. You can specialize in tobacco and then build your career to be ready to work on what you want when the time comes.' "

And indeed, that is the path Professor McAlister took and the trajectory of his career.

He has received more than \$14 million in competitive National Institutes of Health grant funds for tobacco research and other cancer prevention studies.

And since 1996, McAlister has won close to \$2 million in grants for that area of his interest since childhood: Violence, war and other forms of aggression.



War, killing, hunting, and kindred topics have both fascinated and repelled Professor McAlister throughout his life.

A strong interest in firearms was perfectly normal for a Texas-bred boy raised from age six to 19 in a military family.

His father was a bomber pilot in World War II. When he was six years old, his parents divorced. His first stepfather, the late Emil Frank Gallessich, navigated B-52 bombers through the Cold War as a career Air Force officer.

Young McAlister got his first gun when he was 12.

An avid reader of *Texas Fish and Game* magazine, the boy bagged groceries at the former Bergstrom Air Force Base commissary in Austin to save money. His goal was to purchase through a mail order ad in *Boy's Life* magazine a Mossberg rifle taking 22 magnum hollow point "varmint" bullets, with scope.

At age 13, his dream was to "call" and kill a fox. Many failures ensued, but one day a red fox was in his gun's cross-hairs. Instead of squeezing the trigger, he "tagged" it Indian-style by clicking his tongue and letting the fox go free. He didn't know it back then, but tagging can be a step toward manhood among indigenous peoples here.

At age 16, he earned his Eagle Scout rank. During the process, he developed "excellent martial skills" --- and a best friend who suggested he enroll with him in the military after they finished high school in 1966.

The teenager declined. "Before Christmas, he came home in a box," as did another good friend McAlister knew who fought in the Vietnam War.

"I wanted to get some college before joining up, but when I got to the university I was shocked to find myself agreeing with the many teachers and other students who believed that the war was wrong. I wasn't afraid to fight, but I wanted no part of that one."

What was left of his interest in guns and hunting was irrevocably shattered by the so-called "Tower Shooter" in 1966 on the UT-Austin campus.

"Charles Whitman killed three friends," says McAlister. "I was first to the aid of one, but all my training was useless. I did not recognize him, with what a hollow point bullet does to a face."

Years later, in 1996, McAlister started researching sources of violence and violence prevention with a grant from the Carnegie Corporation.

He did so by applying the concept of moral disengagement, a term coined by one of his Stanford mentors, Albert Bandura, PhD, one of the most prominent psychologists in the world.

McAlister defines moral disengagement as "dangerous ways of thinking that make violence seem acceptable."

The two still collaborate. Bandura and McAlister are finishing writing a report on moral disengagement and support for the death penalty in Texas. It will be published in 2010 in a compilation of their work on this topic.

Perhaps their most significant work together to date is research on moral judgments and attitudes toward war. Titled *Mechanism of Moral Disengagement in Support of Military Force: The Impact of Sept. 11*, it was published in 2006 in the *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*.

McAlister was first author, Bandura second author, on the project that included a survey in the United States before and after the September 11, 2001 attacks.

Says McAlister, "Our work is now being used by scholars in divinity and military ethics, and I expect it to have an enduring impact."



The works and words and beliefs of a professor such as Alfred McAlister are bound to provoke discussions, disagreements, and yes, occasionally, controversy.

Some examples:

- ON TOBACCOSince 1975, Professor McAlister has actively supported increasing cigarette taxes -- if parts of the taxes are dedicated to controlling smoking. And he helped show during 2001-2005 with Dr. Philip Huang how the use of settlement funds --- proceeds from the settlement of the state's lawsuit against the tobacco industry -- can cost-effectively save lives by reducing tobacco use.

"I was aghast when the anti-tobacco lobby in Texas decided to pursue higher taxes without a partial dedication to tobacco control. I consider that the immoral equivalent of punishing sinners without seeking to save them. Texas won \$15 billion in 1999 in its lawsuit and takes in close to a billion a year in tobacco taxes," McAlister says.

"These funds are now needed to balance the state budget, making Texas as dependent on tobacco revenues as a smoker is addicted to nicotine."

- ON HEALTH CARE POLICY DEBATE..."I strongly support President Obama's effort to reform health care. Personally I would prefer a public plan option and a transition toward a mostly single-payer government plan, which I have seen in action in Finland and elsewhere.

"For 25 years I have been telling people that really serious public health promotion for whole populations will never occur until we first have really serious public health care (for the whole population)."

- ON WAR FEVER...In 2003, Professor McAlister, with the International Federation of Medical Students' Associations, developed a web site titled "Peace Test" that measured the risk of "war fever" and challenged justifications for war and the dehumanization of enemies.

Says McAlister, "When we sent emails to medical and public health students in Houston encouraging them to visit the website, the backlash was very strong, including an effort to have me fired (from his university post) by an upset medical student. Although my actions were judged proper and not to be political speech by the UT information technology officer, I have decided that the university is not a suitable forum for such a controversial project."

- On VIOLENCE..."Although I preach peace and avoid violence, I do not reject it. One night in Europe a large young man in a ski mask attempted to mug me. I knocked him down and kicked him until he ran away.

"In my research on murder, I differentiate between killing when necessary to protect innocent life versus killing to protect wealth or property. I do not believe it is acceptable to kill to defend property alone. My research has shown that where more people in a given

population support killing in less-than-life threatening situations, homicide rates are higher than in populations with less support for killing."

- ON THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN...McAlister will say only that "Our policy is in flux now. You can write that I believe that military force may not be the best solution to conflict in Afghanistan."
- ON WILDLIFE..."I still love to fish, but not to hunt unless with a camera. I have no reservations about killing a fish if I am going to clean and eat it or feed it to someone else."
- ON HIS PERSONAL SPIRITUAL LIFE...For seven years, influenced at age 12 by Freud, McAlister was an avid atheist. At age 19 he renounced what he calls "that sophomoric pseudo-philosophy." And he launched into a study of indigenous Southwest American religion and branches of Buddhism.



Sunday Morning Fly Fishing

Today, McAlister says, "While seeking to practice teachings of Christ and Buddha, I've chosen pantheism and I worship the moon and stars, rocks, rain, and all waters that flow, as well as all wolves, coyotes, foxes and such."



Professor Alfred McAlister is a person who knows himself fairly well. And he embraces the contradictions in his thinking and his personal life.

For instance, he's intelligent and highly educated, yet he prizes knowledge of nature as highly as book learning.

He is a self-described "lone wolf" who takes only his German Shepherd Otso on his weekly fishing trips and wilderness hikes. Yet he states flatly, "My wife's and my lives revolve around each other."

His wife "keeps my life in balance and makes it more than easy. She both brings me down to earth from the ivory tower and back from the realm of nature."

McAlister was in Finland when he met Marjatta Helena Anneli Kosonen, a successful portrait painter in Helsinki.

Marjatta's own seeming contradictions attracted McAlister. "She is very sophisticated with European sensibilities about politics, society, art, fashion, and design.

"Yet she has little formal schooling. Marjatta is from an earlier time and way of life. She is an authentic Karelian 'nature girl' from the wild Russian borderlands. She can chop wood and build a fire as fast as I can."



The McAlisters with god daughter Huitzillin Barroso, whose mother Cristina is on the faculty of the U.T.-S.P.H. Regional Campus in Brownsville. McAlister recruited Barroso to doctoral studies at the S.P.H. and continues to help mentor her career.

McAlister adds that he and his wife have "traditional roles" in their marriage.

Marjatta, a vegetarian and self-taught expert on healthy eating, prepares "gorgeous salads," her husband says. "Every meal is like living in Wheatsville Co-Op."

The couple has three children between them. Living at home is their son, Mauri, 23. He's an Austin Community College student with straight A's in his communications major.

Melissa, 33, is a spiritual medium living in the forest near Helsinki.

Tuukka, 26, is an Oxford University drop-out and an executive apprentice for a Helsinki telecommunications company.

Professor McAlister supports his wife's art, although now she paints only for family and friends.

She in turn encourages him in his newest avocation, residential building.

On weekends and during vacation, McAlister designs and plans small homes, and hires and supervises the masons and carpenters who construct them.

He's finishing his third in five years, this one on the Pedernales River near Dripping Springs.

McAlister describes the home "as a fusion of traditional Mexican masonry and New Age architecture.

"I build structures that will endure of limestone, concrete, steel and cedar."

That third building, with stars and rainbows in colored glass lined up in Heronian triangles, will be the McAlister's' retirement home.



Professor Alfred McAlister figures he will retire from UT in about six years. Like many professors preparing for retirement, McAlister is mentoring the research of younger faculty members, but not seeking major new grants of his own.

He does intend to pursue at least one "significant" research project: Collaboration with the Alliance for African American Health in Central Texas, a project designed to demonstrate ways to reduce the "vast health disparities" between African Americans and "non-Hispanic 'Whites,' " in Central Texas, McAlister says.

Professor McAlister is enthusiastic about increasing the time and energy he puts into teaching.

His face lights up as he says; "Now I mainly want to teach, teach, teach!"

After his five years at Stanford, McAlister taught public health for five years at Harvard University.

But the Fort Worth native heard the siren song of Central Texas: In 1983 he returned to live in Austin but taught at the UT School of Public Health, based in Houston.

A public health certificate program began in Austin in 2005, and Professor McAlister worked to help establish it. And in 2007, Austin became the fifth regional campus of the UT School of Public Health.

Says Austin Regional Campus dean, Cheryl Perry, "Alfred could be considered the first faculty member here in Austin. He has been particularly influential in attracting very bright students," especially undergraduates from UT-Austin's Plan II and honors programs to ARC certificate and graduate training.

Perry's comments please McAlister.

He lists with obvious relish the courses he currently teaches: Social and Behavioral Aspects of Community Health, a required basic course; Advanced Public Health Communication, a course that is cross-listed in the UT-Austin College of Communication's Department of Advertising; and Legislative Health Policy, a class that includes internships with the Texas Senate and Department of State Health Services.

Says Professor McAlister, "We're building a new program here. And we are getting great students. I want to take the time I have left at UT to transfer as much knowledge and skill as I can to a new generation of public health scholars and activists."