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Long Beach to Boston

How family, community and music shaped my journey from Poly High to Berklee College of Music

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Photography by Provided

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This spring, I graduated from Long Beach Polytechnic High School and made one of the biggest decisions of my life. I chose to attend Berklee College of Music in Boston after receiving a full tuition scholarship. I was also accepted to UC Berkeley, and I feel incredibly grateful for both opportunities. In the end, music has always been my passion, and Berklee felt like the place where I could keep growing as a musician and as a person.

It is hard for me to remember a time when music was not part of my life. I started playing by ear when I was very young and would spend time at the piano trying to figure out songs I loved. Before formal lessons, I was already exploring melodies on my own. I began classical piano studies at age 11 and later added jazz piano at 17, which opened up a whole new way of thinking about music.

Music has always been close to my family. My father, Charles Julian Fearing, is a professional guitarist whose career includes recording on more than 250 gold and platinum records. He began touring at 17 with Barry White and learned from some of the world's best musicians. At home, he was my first mentor. Even though he never formally taught music, he guided me with patience, honesty and a focus on listening and discipline. A lot of what I know started with those moments at home.

One of the biggest moments for me this year was auditioning for Berklee with a Chopin Polonaise. When I found out I had been accepted and received a full scholarship, I felt a mix of excitement and gratitude. It felt like years of practice and support from my family had led to that moment.

At Poly High, I worked hard in school, served as captain of the tennis team and helped win a Moore League Doubles Championship. I also performed in jazz band, earned music honors and participated in the Jackrabbit Pageant, where I performed "Dizzy Fingers" and was named Most Talented.

I also grew a lot through the YMCA of Greater Long Beach's Youth and Government program. That experience helped me understand how to think about bigger issues, listen to different perspectives and feel more confident speaking up for what I believe in. It also helped shape how I see the world beyond music and sports.

Outside of school, I work at Long Beach Creamery with my older brother JJ. We also play basketball together and spend a lot of time with family.

My Puerto Rican heritage is also a big part of who I am. I have been able to travel to the island and connect more deeply with my roots. Family gatherings often turn into music sessions where we play everything from classical to jazz to Bad Bunny songs. Those moments mean a lot to me.

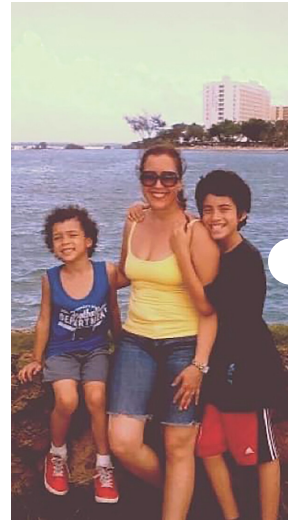
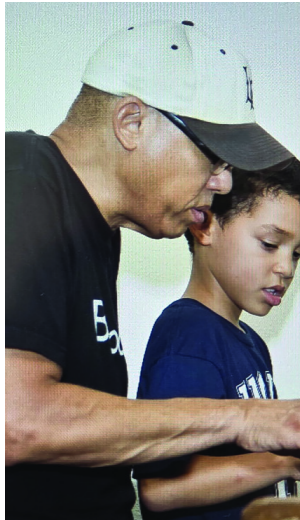
In our family, we talk about SFC, which stands for Strength, Family, and Connection. Those words really describe how we got through both the good times and hard times together.

My mom, Andrea Marisol Sulsona, often reminds me of that. She is a cancer survivor, a UCLA graduate, and vice president of development at the YMCA of Greater Long Beach. She has always shown me what strength and perseverance look like.

She says, "We have leaned on strength, family, and connection through everything life has brought us. Music has always been the thread that ties it together. Watching Alex pursue his dream at Berklee is the realization of years of dedication, perseverance and love."

As I get ready to leave Long Beach for Boston, I know I am carrying all of that with me. My family, my community and everything I have learned along the way will always be part of my story.

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Barba Students Honored

Three students of Sandra Barba, of Long Beach, CA, were honored by their teacher in their recital following 2013 Guild auditions. Mark McDermott presented his fifth National program. Matthew McDermott and Rhiannon O'Brien presented State programs.

Mark, age 12, was awarded his 5-Year National Program Trophy by his teacher in recital at Fields Pianos in Santa Ana on June 30, 2013. He has played piano for eight years, and participated in the Piano Guild auditions for seven years. Mark enjoys the piano so much that he plays for school masses and puts on a Christmas program for his family. He attends St. Joseph Elementary School, where he maintains a 4.0 GPA. He won first place at his school science fair, and honorable mention at the Los Angeles County Science Fair. In the Archdiocese of Los Angeles Academic Decathlon, Mark reached fourth place in the Social Studies category. Outside of school and piano, he is a competitive swimmer, and has qualified for Junior Olympics 8 times in five different events. He also plays baseball on his school team, where he excels as a catcher and infielder. Despite his busy schedule with academics and sports, Mark still finds time to put together a ten-piece program for Guild, containing a variety of repertoire from all of the periods of music, and an assortment of other songs for holidays and time in between the two. He will continue to play for years to come.

Matthew, age 14, was awarded for his second State-level audition by his teacher at the recital. He has also been recognized as a two-time National Winner, a two-time District Winner, and a one-time Local Winner in auditions. He has played piano for eight years, and has participated in Guild auditions for seven years. He has elaborated on his piano studies to perform a Christmas program for his family. He attends Saint John Bosco High School, a rigorous Salesian-Preparatory school, where he maintains



Mark McDermott



Matthew McDermott

a 4.0 GPA. He was honored in six different subject areas for outstanding performances throughout the 2012-2013 school year. He was awarded the Presidential Scholarship the previous year to attend Saint John Bosco High School and was also the valedictorian of his eighth grade class. Outside of school and piano, he is an accomplished swimmer and water polo player. In swimming, he has participated at over 20 major regional meets (including Junior Olympics) and has placed 15 times in the top 8 and an additional 25 times in the top 16. He also finished 9th and 13th in two events at Trinity League Varsity Finals as a freshman. In water polo, he was the Most Valuable Player of his school's team. Despite setting aside large amounts of time to achieve excellence at school and in the pool, Matthew still assembles a seven-piece program for Guild auditions, which includes a variety of repertoire from all periods of music, as well as more songs for the holidays and family entertainment. He will continue to play the piano for many years to come.

Rhiannon O'Brien has played the piano with Ms. Barba for more than half of her 10 young years. She enjoys getting dressed up twice a year to play in recital, and in four years has never once been nervous for her piano Guild auditions. This past year, her remarkable ability to perform well under pressure earned her State honors. In addition to playing the piano, Rhiannon plays the violin at school and sings constantly. Last fall, she enrolled in Leland Stanford Middle School in Long Beach, where she has been singing in the chorus every day. When she is not making music or studying to get her 4.0 GPA, you can probably find her swimming or playing volleyball, like her dad and older brothers who adore her. If she's not at the pool or setting a volleyball, you can find her in the kitchen with her mom whipping up something decadent and delicious.



Rhiannon O'Brien

place in the 400-meter relay and second place in the 60-meter field in this year's contest organized by Northern California Chinese Culture Athletic Federation. His favorite school subjects are math, science, social studies, and writing detailed stories.

Jason loves riding roller coasters, watching movies, learning Chinese and drawing. He was the first prize winner in a Chinese poetry recital contest in the Ninth Chinese Language Bridge Cup Contests organized by Confucius Institute at SF State University & SF United School District. He also received Art Awards as a Winner in Excellence for two years. His favorite hobby is to play the piano. Recently, he performed piano and won first place in the 2013 Children's talent contest organized by Sing Dao Daily. He studies piano with Dun Yin Liu and earned Five-Year National honors in 2013 Guild auditions. He also likes playing the violin. He was the youngest to join the Ewald competition after getting a "Superior" grade in the AIMS Music Festival and obtained honorable mention in the final competition.



Jason Chen

Chen Earns Five-Year Honors

Jason Chen is a fifth grade student at Robert Louis Stevenson Elementary School in San Francisco, CA. He enjoys playing basketball and soccer, swimming, running, and fixing electronics. He earned a third place in a swimming contest last year, first