

Michael Harris



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Managing director of the Afro's Chicken Shop chain of eateries

MICHAEL HARRIS grew up in Amanzimtoti and as he did not come from a wealthy background started working from an early age. His first job was at a local grocery store where he earned 10 cents an hour over weekends. He saved much of these earnings in order to buy a camera. He then became his school photographer and earned money selling photographs.

Michael's entrepreneurial spirit continued during school holidays when he and his friends would spend hours in the sea diving for coins that had dropped from the pockets of holiday makers. Collecting and returning glass bottles for deposits was an additional source of earnings.

Following his school years, Michael studied part-time to become an accountant. On completion he qualified as a chartered accountant.

Immediately following this qualification, he went into the property industry. He explains, "My love of property and building has remained a constant. Whether building a house, or a business, they all have the same meaning."

Michael says he got involved in Afro's Chicken Shop by default. "Afro's was a tenant of mine in one of the buildings that I owned. I loved the brand and enjoyed what it stood for – simple food that was fresh, tasty, healthy and affordable."

He added that he had always had an interest in food and ran a restaurant for three years in the 1980s.

An opportunity arose to invest in the business when the owner required both financial and managerial assistance. He decided to invest in Afro's to further his passion for building things up and unsurprisingly the business has grown a lot since then. "I was semi-retired but decided that there was only so much fishing and travelling one

can do. I felt I wanted to carry on, build something and keep pushing."

Michael describes his role as being like a bus driver. "I have a capable young team of guys and girls and I provide input in terms of experience. Afro's is a young person's brand, that includes the management team as well as all the shop keepers – they all do a great job. I have a lot of fun working with young people, they inspire me, and they are the reason that I get up in the morning."

Reflecting on what business principles guide him, he says that he has read a lot of autobiographies and is motivated by them.

"However, when you are at the coal face, you have to make decisions based on your gut feeling. You have to do your own thing. No amount of business gurus can assist much in your situation. There is an answer to everything and a solution to every problem. You have just got to find it and you have to adapt."

Michael believes that his success has been driven by perseverance - by never giving up and through a rigid work ethic. "Things don't happen overnight; hard work and passion is required. Planning and execution are the only way that you will succeed."

He added, "I have learnt that honesty is really important in any business – you have to be honest with yourself, with employees, with everybody, and ensure that you conduct yourself morally all the time."

His advice for anyone starting a business is that it's important not to have any delusions of grandeur. "There is a lot of hard work – identify a career and have a passion for what you are doing – think about what you are doing. Its 90% hard work and 10% enjoyment."

When not growing Afro's sites around the country, Michael's passion is fishing. "I enjoy any form of fishing – deep sea, hunting down tiger fish or elusive trout. I try and get away to fish as much as possible and I read autobiographies.