



MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Andrew Neill

NAEMT Membership Committee Member
and EMS District Chief, Nashville Fire Department



With 26 years in EMS, Andrew Neill is EMS District Chief for the Nashville Fire Department, NAEMT Membership Committee Member and NAEMT's Education Coordinator for Tennessee. A sought-after EMS educator, Neill believes in creating a dynamic classroom experience for his students. For over two decades, Neill has also worked as a paramedic, tactical paramedic, and flight paramedic.

We caught up with Neill, who shared his thoughts on going to college in his 40s and what it takes to make a great EMS instructor (it involves silly string).

You're a lifelong learner. Why is that important to you?

I recently finished my bachelor's degree online, and now I'm working on my Master of Arts in Emergency and Disaster Management.

EMS is one of the few professions that doesn't require a bachelor's degree. At one time, firefighting and EMS were rated as some of the easiest jobs to get without a college degree. I don't agree with that. The only way we are going to command respect from other healthcare professions is to hold ourselves to a higher standard. Education is something that makes us a credible profession.

I don't mean to imply that I have anything against anybody that doesn't have a degree. I know many people who are very proficient at what they do without degrees. But for us as a healthcare profession, we need to move toward requiring more education. It may not change at a national level, but we have to change it for ourselves.

Also, medicine is always changing and always evolving. We have to evolve with it, and in my opinion, you need education to do that.

What was it like starting college in your 40s?

I'm 49 years old, and I got my bachelor's degree last year. So, it took me quite a while. I won't say I wasn't a little scared of it. I doubted my own abilities. But I believe adult learners are the most committed. We have experienced life. We have jobs, families, and responsibilities, so we appreciate the opportunity to be there.

The human brain has the capacity to learn at any age. It's like a muscle. If we don't exercise it by learning, it will degrade, like any other muscle. But if we use it, it stays strong.

100% of my classes are online, through American Public University. Many of my fellow students are active duty military defending our country. There are brave men and women taking these classes and I'm humbled by them. They're bettering

themselves, trying to make opportunities for themselves, but at the same time they're also dodging bullets.

What makes a good EMS educator?

There's a fine line between educating and entertaining. You have to do both. You have to make learning fun. You get up there, and you do whatever it takes to make the students want to learn. If you have to scream and holler, roll around on the floor, or stand on a table and dance – whatever it takes, you have to be willing to go that extra mile. Otherwise after a while it becomes mundane, routine and just a job. Educating is a privilege.

You should see what I do to teach OB and delivery. I'll strap on a manikin and have them 'deliver' me, and I do a good acting job. I have cans of foam hidden under the blanket to simulate the body fluids you should expect when you're delivering a baby in the field and to teach the importance of using proper protective equipment. If you're not wearing goggles or a facemask, you're getting hosed. These poor kids will be covered in foam but they're loving it, and they will never forget the lesson.

One time I didn't have foam so I ran down to the Dollar General and bought silly string, which works well too. I've had paramedics call me and say, 'I just had the worst field delivery ever, and all I could think of was you screaming at me and it made it easier.' I had one who called and said, 'I just delivered a baby, but there was no silly string on me. What's up?'

You have a packed schedule, yet you still make time to volunteer for NAEMT. What motivates you?

EMS is changing, and I'm committed to being a part of that change. We need to come together as a profession through collaborative effort. There's strength in numbers. NAEMT is a voice for all EMS professionals, and if you're part of that voice, you're part of that change.

My other motivation is that I believe in promoting good quality education and higher education for EMS professionals. I taught the first Prehospital Trauma Life Support (PHTLS) course in Alabama, because I thought it was the best course out there. Today the entire Nashville Fire Department takes PHTLS, and it's the dominant prehospital trauma course throughout much of Tennessee. We're also getting ready to teach Tactical Combat Casualty Care (TCCC) to police, fire and EMS in Nashville.

Tell us about someone who has been a big influence on your career, and what you learned from them.

Rick Collier was a program director at the college where I went to EMT and paramedic school. He was my educator, my mentor, and eventually my co-worker. He served in Vietnam, and had done and seen things I can only imagine. He really saw the importance of educating the next generation of EMS professionals. He helped me mature as an individual, and as an educator. He also taught me the value of education for myself and for my children.

What's the best Christmas present you ever got?

A trinket box that my son gave me a couple of years ago. He was keeping all these little mementos from times we had together – a hockey puck from our first hockey game together, seashells from our first time to the beach, a note that he wrote about me when he was in elementary school. He'd been saving these things since he was 5 years old, and he's 25 now. I don't like people to know I'm sentimental, but I about broke out in tears.

What was your worst summer job?

Probably my very first job. I was a dishwasher in a pizza restaurant at 16 years old. It put me off spaghetti and meatballs for years.