

## **MEMBER SPOTLIGHT**

# Terry Bottjen

*Paramedic, Painter and Pastor*

*An EMT and paramedic for 39 years, Terry Bottjen is among the nation's most experienced – and eclectic – EMS practitioners. When he's not answering emergency calls in rural South Dakota, Bottjen can be found serving as a pastor in his church or running his art gallery, where he's known as "the Lightning Artist."*

*"I'm one of the fastest artists in the world. I can paint a 4-by-2 foot landscape in 20 minutes," Bottjen says.*

*Bottjen's work as a traveling artist helped launch his career in EMS. While driving around the country demonstrating speed painting at state fairs, malls and motorcycle rallies, he came across lots of car wrecks. He wanted to be better equipped to help the injured.*

*"On TV, it always seemed like you had just a couple of minutes to get somebody out of the car because it was going to burn up or explode. When I'd see wrecks, I'd run and grab them to pull them out of the car. I told my friend who was an EMT. She said, 'Did you ever actually see those cars blow?' I told her, 'Well actually, no.' She said, 'You need to take an EMT class. You don't just drag people out of cars.' She got me to take the EMT class so when I was on the road I would know what to do."*



*Back at home in Hill City, South Dakota (pop: 900), Bottjen borrowed an Army surplus MASH truck and started a volunteer first response squad. To enable transports, he mortgaged his house and art gallery and purchased a used ambulance, forming the volunteer Hill City Ambulance Service.*

*After running the service for 16 years, Bottjen formed an ambulance district with a governing board, and donated the ambulance and equipment to his town.*

*Today, Bottjen lives in Faith, South Dakota, with his wife, Diana, a former firefighter-EMT in the Chicago area. He is a pastor at Faith Christian Center, and a paramedic for Indian Health Service (IHS) Ambulance Service, which serves the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation, headquartered in Eagle Butte. He spoke with NAEMT News about his life as an artist, pastor and paramedic, what it took to launch an ambulance service from scratch, and what's kept him motivated for so many years.*

## Tell us about IHS Ambulance Service.

We serve an area 50 to 60 miles wide and 100 miles long. We're an ALS service. We're trying to get all of our EMTs credentialed to at least the EMT-Intermediate level. Our closest major hospitals are about 175 miles away. You can be with a patient two to three hours. Even if you take them to be stabilized at a smaller hospital that's closer, there's a good chance you're going to transport that patient afterwards. A lot of things can happen during that time. The more advanced training our EMTs have, the better for the patient. It's why I became a paramedic in 1990. Being in the boonies, you need all of the information and resources you can get.

## Your first passion was art. How did you get your start?

I grew up on a ranch out in the country. When I had nothing to do, I would play around with my sister's paints. A man who was classified as the world's fastest painter, Burnette "Bert" Pletan, had a gallery a few hours away.

My Dad stopped in there and told me I had to see this guy paint. He thought maybe I could learn something from him. I used to have a lot of problems with painting sky and water, and this guy did the most beautiful skies and water and he'd do it in a few minutes. I got to know Bert and he invited me to come work with him. Eventually I picked up on his technique. Then I put my style and his style together.

When you're painting fast, touch is key. I use a 2-inch house brush, and put anywhere from four to nine colors on it at the same time. The pressure and the angles bring out the different colors and the shading. When I do a demonstration, I'll paint from 20 to 30 paintings a day. God gave me a photographic memory for scenery. If I drive through an area, I can bring that picture back up in my mind 20 years later and paint it.

## Your technique sounds a lot like Bob Ross, who painted landscapes on his PBS show the 'Joy of Painting'.

Oh yes, Bob and his 'happy little trees.' Bob used to come into Bert's gallery. He learned some of his technique from me and Bert.



## What did it take to start an ambulance service from the ground up?

I was living in Hill City and running a gallery there. I asked my friends who had gone through the EMT class with me, 'If I could get us an ambulance, would they volunteer?' There were about 10 of us who jumped in and helped. We got the police department and later the county to dispatch for us, and the art gallery was our base.

Our very first call was a save. A person was out swimming, got halfway across the lake, and couldn't make it back. By the time we got there, he was underwater quite a long time. We revived him.

Billings helped keep us financially stable, but we did fundraisers and raffles to keep us going. Our volunteers sometimes had to buy gas.

## You're a longtime member of NAEMT. Why is membership in your professional association important?

NAEMT brings the EMS future into the EMS present. It gives us that support to get the information we need, which is so important in rural areas. There is always something new to learn. Training is always changing. NAEMT brings the changes to the forefront. I truly believe that God uses all of us as EMTs and paramedics – we are the hands and voice of God when we treat patients. NAEMT teaches us how to do that.

## You've been in EMS for 39 years. How do you stay motivated and avoid burnout?

I have to give God credit. He has poured his passion into me and given me energy and a heart of compassion. That's what God built me for.

I invite him along on every ambulance call. I silently put a prayer over every person in that ambulance. I don't shove my religion on them, but if they ask for prayer, they get it. I have seen miracles take place in the ambulance. There were a few times that I got close to burnout, but God would excite me again over a call and I'd be good for another long stretch.

## How long do you think you'll keep going with EMS?

Every year I think this might be it. I'll ask, 'Lord, am I about done?' He says, 'No, keep going another season.' I think it would be nice to see 40 years at this.