



MEMBER SPOTLIGHT Margaret Farrell

Volunteer EMT Since 1990

By day, Margaret Farrell is a resource information specialist for the U.S. Forest Service. During her time off, she volunteers as assistant director of Keystone Ambulance Service, which serves a rural area in the Black Hills of South Dakota.

With Mount Rushmore National Monument in their backyard, Farrell's ambulance service keeps busy answering calls from tourists who fall ill or get injured while passing through. "We have extremely curvy roads. People are looking at the natural beauty and not paying attention to the road, so we respond to a lot of motor vehicle and motorcycle accidents. Mount Rushmore is at 5,300 feet, and we get over 3 million tourists visiting every year. Some develop respiratory illness from the elevation," Farrell explained.

Farrell spoke with NAEMT News about almost becoming a geologist, and what keeps her motivated after 30 years in EMS.



What did you think you were going to be when you grew up?

I majored in geology and ran hurdles for the University of Wyoming. I was really intrigued by the idea that you could travel anywhere and by looking at the rock formations and soil types, understand what happened there millions of years ago. In some classes I was the only woman. It was a challenge but I enjoyed it.

So how did you get into EMS?

My brother was an EMT for the National Park Service. When I became a U.S Forest Service employee, I thought, 'I can do this.' I was certified in January 1990.

What do you like about being an EMS practitioner in rural South Dakota?

The natural beauty, and our sense of community. The Rocky Mountains are big

and majestic but the Black Hills just wrap around and hold you. All of the towns are small, so we all know the EMTs from the different services covering the Black Hills and surrounding communities. It's a wonderful network of people.

It can be challenging though. I've hauled my neighbors. I did CPR on one of my best friends. A lot of EMS folks in small towns face those kinds of situations every day. You learn it's all part of the job.

Do you have a favorite spot?

The Mount Rushmore landmark. It includes four presidents: George Washington for the founding of the country, Thomas Jefferson for the expansion, Theodore Roosevelt for conservation, and Abraham Lincoln for the preservation of our country. They encompass what America stands for.

One of my favorite spots at Mount Rushmore is the Avenue of Flags. There are 56 flags to represent each state, U.S. territory, commonwealth and the District of Columbia. Millions of people visit to see the best of our nation. It's amazing the diversity of languages that you hear, all there to admire our democracy.

You've been answering 911 calls for nearly 30 years. What keeps you motivated?

It gives me the ability to give back. I enjoy helping people. Everybody has talents. Everybody can do something. You need to give back those things you can do. I can do EMS.

What are some of the big changes you've seen since you got your start in EMS?

When I became an EMT, we didn't even have 911 yet in my area. You called a local number for law enforcement, and they sent the ambulance. We've gone from being all volunteers to being mostly paid. My service used to be all volunteer. Now we're a combination of volunteer and paid because of the realities of people's lives today. We've also integrated more females into all positions. 1994 was the first time I saw a professional female paramedic. She was working for a fire department in Boise, Idaho. At the time I was a volunteer EMT. I knew women could volunteer, but I hadn't realized they could be professional paid paramedics. I think we've come a long way as far as diversity, but we can always integrate more diversity in everything we do.

How have you personally evolved as an EMT?

I have gained empathy for the patient. I've learned that placing a hand on a patient's shoulder, or holding their hand – that nonverbal touch means a lot to that patient. 10% of what we do is the medications, splinting, bleeding control. 90% is helping that patient cope.

I've grown in my skill level, moving from an EMT basic to an advanced EMT. I've also grown in my understanding that the more knowledge you share, the stronger you become. I'm a longtime NAEMT GEMS [Geriatric Education for EMS] and PHTLS [Prehospital Trauma Life Support] instructor, and recently started teaching TECC [Tactical Emergency Casualty Care]. I have also taught EMT classes and am a training officer for the South Dakota EMS Association.

I enjoy teaching and mentoring because the more knowledge you give somebody else, the better off everybody is, and the stronger you and your community are.

Why are you an NAEMT member?

EMS needs a national voice to further the work that we do. We have changed so much since EMS started in the early 70s. We need to have a unified voice to keep current with the laws, medical technology, and keep our standards moving forward for the best patient care. NAEMT helps our profession have that unified voice so that we have the best chances of getting laws passed that enable us to do what we need to do out in the field.

What do you do when you're not working or volunteering?

I enjoy pheasant hunting in the fall. Being around friends, watching the dogs work and the challenge of hitting the pheasant in flight is a lot of fun.

Any guilty pleasures?

Old Dutch Potato Chips.