

FROM CADETS TO RNS: HOW THE CHATHAM EMERGENCY SQUAD SHAPED THE FUTURE FOR TODAY'S YOUNG PROFESSIONALS ENTERING THE MEDICAL FIELD

Contributed by Craig Alperowitz,
Chatham Emergency Squad

// I had no plans to work in the field of medicine - I wanted to be an engineer," admits Justin Corbitt who graduated from Fairfield University as a nursing major and recently passed the national test to become a registered nurse (RN). Same with Jay Crigler, who graduated from the University of Scranton with a nursing degree this spring and achieved her RN designation the same week as Corbitt in August 2019. "My mom was a nurse, and I wanted nothing to do with that, growing up. I was very interested in the criminal justice system and saw myself in that field."

But for both of these young professionals, all that changed in the Spring of 2013 when they were sophomores at Chatham High School and began volunteering with the Chatham Emergency Squad's cadet program later that summer. Both became certified EMTs and they learned the ins and outs of pre-hospital patient care, teaching them life-saving skills and setting a new trajectory for both their lives.

Sarah Nelson, on the other hand, knew exactly what she wanted. She was accepted into the cadet class of 2009, graduated from Chatham High School in 2011 and studied nursing at Quinnipiac University in Connecticut. "No one in my family was in medicine, but I knew from an early age it's something I wanted to do and joining the Chatham Emergency Squad made it crystal clear this was going to be my profession."

All three of these former cadets are now working at local area hospitals. Nelson is an RN in the emergency room at Morristown Hospital. Crigler is a patient care technician at Overlook Hospital while she seeks full-time employment as an RN, and Corbitt is an RN at Overlook in the intensive care unit. All continue to volunteer as a certified member of the Chatham Emergency Squad in addition to their work responsibilities.

Beginning as an experimental program in 2003, the Chatham Emergency Squad cadet program has since flourished into a more formal program that teaches life-saving skills to students entering their junior year of high school. Cadets join the



Cadets to nurses: (L-R) Jay Crigler, Sarah Nelson and Justin Corbitt

Squad as high school sophomores and, soon thereafter, earn certification as a New Jersey EMT. After graduation, they are eligible to become full members of the Squad.

"Many of our cadets go on to careers in healthcare. No matter their career choice, all cadets who complete the program have a highly developed sense of service," said Steve Davenport, captain of the Chatham Emergency Squad and co-cadet manager with Nicole DiMaggio. "The pre-hospital training we provide can serve as a springboard for other patient care settings. But even more amazing, we see many former cadets returning to their roots and continuing to serve with the Squad after college graduation. They strengthen the Squad not only by extending our roster but also by virtue of their advanced training."

"Joining the Squad was the best decision I ever made," said Crigler. "We do an excellent job of caring for and transporting patients to the hospital, but I wanted to be there for the next phase of patient care - and thus, my nursing career was born." Corbitt agreed. "It opened my eyes to new possibilities and the long-term opportunities are endless," he said.

He's right, actually. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Employment Projections 2016-2026, Registered Nursing is listed among the top occupations in terms of job growth through 2026. The Bureau also projects the need for an additional 203,700 new RNs each year through 2026 to fill newly created positions and to replace retiring nurses.

Asked what advice she'd give to today's high school freshmen and sophomores, Nelson suggests they jump in and learn as much as they possibly can. "Don't be afraid to go outside your comfort zone; you'll learn valuable life skills and make life-long friends." Corbitt and Crigler agreed, both referring to their assigned duty crews as their "second family."

With the foundation of an education provided by the Chatham Emergency Squad, there's no telling how far these young professionals will fly. In fact, you may have to look to the skies in the years ahead, as both Crigler and Corbitt have aspirations of becoming flight nurses and providing quality care to critical patients needing to be transported via aircraft.

And who will meet them at the hospital when they land? Don't be surprised if it's Sarah Nelson.

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