



# GROWING GREAT MEN

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Past student and hero Firefighter Andrew Wood relives the night on the job that changed his life. Post this experience, Andrew is calling for a law to be passed to support firefighters contracting work-related cancer, and states that shedding light on mental illness is his priority.

**Andrew, thank you for your time. Your story is captivating and nothing short of gut wrenching. Can you describe the events of the night that changed your life and what went through your mind?**

Thanks for having me here. It's good to be back at the College. On January 4, 2014, two colleagues and I were called out to a job to where there was a fellow threatening self-harm in a building. The police were already there, and they were asking if we could gain access to the second story apartment through a window. We went up, I broke open the window into the small, dark apartment and entered. Because of the nature of the job, I didn't know what I was going to see, but proceeded to go in and open up the front door. The police came in and went straight to the bedroom where the man was. I went to the kitchen to turn off the gas stove, but it was already off.

As I was walking out of the kitchen, one of the policemen came towards me carrying an 8kg gas cylinder. I asked him if it was turned off, to which he replied, "It's empty". I said to him clearly that we needed to get out of there. I took one step towards the front door before the building was engulfed in flames.

All I recall from that instant was an incredible wave of heat coming over me. Thankfully my back was to it and I had all my protective gear on, including my helmet and neck protector, but I do remember my face starting to burn. My initial thought was that I had to get out of there, otherwise I was going to die. I knew that I was burning and that we had to get out straight away. At that point I registered hearing horrific screaming from the three police officers from behind me - death screams. They were in agonising pain. There was some fiddling around with the door, but I managed to get it open, and we ran.





"You've got blisters, but don't worry about that, you're breathing... you're alive...you're out of there... you're not burning anymore, don't worry about your face; you're alive".

I was at the front, followed by the male policeman and the female police constable. As we ran downstairs the male police officer behind me disappeared into an apartment, to try and get water onto himself. The female officer followed me downstairs and collapsed outside on the ground, at which point I asked neighbours to go and get a hose to start to cool her down. I looked around to try and find my fellow firefighter who had been up on the balcony when we first arrived. When I'd entered the apartment he had stayed there. My officer was asking me where he was, but I couldn't tell him. For a moment we thought he had been blown off the balcony in the explosion. It turned out he hadn't, thankfully. He'd managed to get down the ladder and get back to the fire truck. At that moment, as I looked up, I noticed the third female police officer up on the balcony, on fire, screaming in excruciating pain. I said to my officer that I was going to go up and get her, but he said, "No, no, you're burnt, stay down here". I told him that I couldn't leave her and that I had to get up there. She was screaming. I said to her that we had to get her down, but she told me that she couldn't manage it. I assured her that I would help her.



We got onto the ladder and I reassured her that I would support her. I held her back as she climbed down, blood dripping and seriously burnt. As soon as we got her down to the ground, she collapsed. I went to my fire truck and grabbed my oxygen and burns kit. She asked me how severe her condition was. I answered, "You've got blisters, but don't worry about that, you're breathing... you're alive... you're out of there... you're not burning anymore, don't worry about your face, you're alive". Nearby neighbours worked on one officer as I worked on the other. People were telling me to step away as I was burnt myself, but I couldn't step away. I became very focused on looking after these officers. I think it gave me purpose. It really helped me with my own burns. Eventually some of my crew came over and said that there were people at the scene now who could properly look after the officers and that I needed to get into an ambulance myself. I asked them to take the girls first, given their state was far worse than mine. I was registering a bit of pain at that point, but there was a lot of adrenalin. But these two girls, they were touch and go. When I was told the officers had been put in the ambulance, I was then happy to go to the hospital.

#### **How did life as you know it change after the incident?**

I'm certainly a lot more cautious - a lot more cautious than I used to be. I have a background in outdoor education - I used to teach it. I used to love white water rafting, skiing, sea kayaking, scuba diving, all that kind of stuff. I still do those activities, but I'm a lot more cautious. I don't enjoy putting myself in life threatening situations. I'm hyper aware of how fragile

life is and how quickly things can change. As tragic as it is, I guess that I've had that real contrast of being able to see how the police have fared and how I've fared, and that often gives me a reminder of where I could be, so I'm careful. I don't know if this attitude has come directly from the explosion itself, or whether it's being four weeks away from welcoming my first child. I think that plays into it quite a lot. I now have a family I need to look after and I need to be there to help them...or perhaps it comes with the territory of getting older. Or maybe it's all three.

I have a lot more focus on mental health issues as a result of the experience. The gentleman who was threatening self-harm... the whole situation, is very sad. It irks me that people want to do such a thing. As a result, I'm trying to get programs up and running to make firefighters a lot more aware of how to deal with people with mental health issues. For me, it's a huge issue in our society. I read a lot and see so many sad stories that are attributed to mental health issues. This experience has certainly changed my life, and I suppose that's why I have a real focus on it. I don't want to see any more of our Emergency Service workers, particularly Firefighters, Police and Ambulance Officers, get in these situations. I've seen the police officers since the explosion and it's so sad. My belief is that there needs to be a greater focus on mental health. I'm passionate that as Emergency Services and as a society and in Government, we need to be looking into better ways of prevention, educating people and dealing with these tough topics. It's a big issue. So many sad stories have happened in Melbourne

alone, involving children, as a result of mental health issues. These innocent kids end up being the victims and it's not okay.

#### **Tell me more about your focus on mental health issues for men in particular.**

When I reflected on my time at Salesian College Chadstone, the benefits really came to mind. Of late, I have been reading specifically about depression in men, and the research is attributing levels to a lack of male friendships and the ability to open up emotionally. With men between the ages of 26 and 48, the risk of depression is higher, simply because they just don't have that male outlet/support network. Thinking back to the male friendships that I made at school and still have today (and the same for my brother), we were so fortunate that we went to a school that provided such solid male bonding opportunities and mateship.

Today, I am focused on exploring domestic violence and the role that men can play in preventative measures. I was very taken aback by the story of the 2015 Australian of the Year, Rosie Batty. In an industry like the MFB, which is heavily dominated by men, there's real scope, as I see it, to playing a role in mental illness awareness.

#### **There was a flashover with the Middle Park gas explosion. Do you have any memory of that exact moment, and do you find yourself reliving the experience?**

I remember two nights after the explosion, lying in bed with my wife next to me. We were waking up every two hours to apply cream

and clean the burns on my face. I remember lying there, trying to sleep, thinking what an amazing life changing experience it was that I went through, and that I should try and remember the details, so that if I ever needed to be able to recall it, I would be able to. I lay there, trying to remember what it was like and where I was, picturing myself turning and then feeling the heat on my face. As I started to go through all of this, it registered with me that this probably wasn't the sort of thing one should focus on specifically remembering. Rather, it was the sort of thing I should probably try and forget. I decided at that point to take it on board as an amazing experience in my life, but to now move on from it.

A psychologist was offered to me, and I took up the opportunity to talk through the experience. She confirmed that I was fine, but certainly didn't suggest recalling the experience to get it out of my system. I've reflected since, wondering if I am repressing this, but I don't believe I am. I'm glad that I have been able to move on from it. I feel very removed from the experience, which for me has been a healthy way to approach it. I have no qualms about talking about the night with people who are interested, because it was an amazing experience. I am, however, consciously separated from it and I don't want to recall emotions from that exact moment that things happened, the moment that changed some people's lives forever.

**Post this experience, you have called for a law to be passed to support firefighters contracting work-related cancer. Talk to me about how this experience as a firefighter has pushed you in this direction.**



The Fire Brigade and the Union have been fighting for Presumptive Legislation, whereby if a fire fighter contracts a cancer, it is presumed that they contracted it firefighting, because of the higher incident of cancer in the industry. This legislation has been supported in a recent report conducted by Monash University. It breaks my heart to say that I know a handful of firefighters who are currently battling cancer. Some of these are young people, some of them have young families and they are fighting these horrific cancers that are riddling their body. I know plenty of guys who have died from cancer since I've been on the job (six years), and still today there are people dying, who are not getting the funding for medical help that they need to live out their last days. It's a situation where people have no option but to use up all their sick leave, and colleagues are donating their sick leave so that these people can get the appropriate treatment and still be there to support their families. Tragically, these people are spending the last years of their lives battling to try and get some kind of compensation for necessary medical help.

For a while we've been fighting to get this Presumptive Legislation passed. The previous Government requested that they view the Monash Report and then conduct a report to see what they say about it. In the meantime, Canberra firefighters have succeeded in having the legislation passed. Tasmanian, Western Australian, Canadian and other United States firefighters have got it. Victoria is still waiting.

I hate to think about people I'm working with right now

who have just joined the job, that in four to five years' time they may contract these cancers and have to die at very young ages, fighting to get this funding and trying to provide for families at the same time. This is a topic I am incredibly passionate about. To watch these guys, who started out as healthy people and now who are skin and bone, breaks your heart, it really does, knowing that they've contracted this because they've gone into situations to help others. I know economics are a factor in the decision, but if people are doing that kind of selfless act then they should be looked after. I think they've identified 18 to 20 different types of cancers that firefighters are subjected to developing.

Lately, the media has been highlighting the Fiskville Enquiry, specifically the carcinogenic levels in the water of that training facility. Now, I went through that training facility, and I'm scared to think of what might come up in the next few years because of what chemicals I was exposed to at the time. I have a little baby on the way in four weeks, and I want to be around then to see him or her grow up.

#### **Andrew, are you a man of faith?**

I certainly feel that being raised as a Catholic has had a positive effect on both my working and family life. The reason I say this is that, being raised as a Catholic, I was exposed to the fundamentals of compassion, empathy, helping others, mateship and forgiveness, which in my line of work is a huge part of where I am now.

Religion aside, I believe all firefighters hold many Catholic fundamental beliefs.

I don't think they join the job unless they carry those ideals of empathy, forgiveness or the notion of helping others. That's how they get selected for the job, and that's why they are in the job. Regardless of demographics, firefighters are there to help, regardless of their denomination.

I love the work that I do because I'm surrounded by people who exude that willingness to do good and support those in need. It's the beautiful thing about my job. I feel it is a real privilege to be paid to help others in a direct, front line kind of a way. I feel very humbled to be there at some of the most amazing times of people's lives, when they need you the most, and to do that day in day out. It's not just that once in a lifetime experience. People say to me, "Wow, I saw a car accident the other day". Well, we get to see that every day, and hold people's hands through the experience and, hopefully, help bring them back from that horrible place and see them go on to live a wonderful life.

#### **With a three generation connection to Salesian College Chadstone, what are the long lasting effects of this connection on your family?**

I feel very fortunate that my generation of family members has always had a strong commitment to Salesian College Chadstone, and particularly the Salesian family, who have such a focus on social justice. It's a topic that my family is very passionate about. My grandmother at 96 years old still donates regularly, my young nephew at the age of 8 busks at the local shops and donates 50 per cent of his earnings to local refugees.

The social justice principle has been a focus throughout my family and still today for me, my brother, my father and even my sisters, who have been involved in the Don Bosco camps.

The brotherhood and mateship from Salesian has been a valued connection for me and my brother. I regularly read about mental health issues, in particular male depression, and one of the key themes for sufferers is about having an outlet to speak. I feel fortunate that I have been in that position where I have been able to help Salesian mates that I have had since my time at the school, because I myself have learnt the value of having that outlet, and they too have given me that outlet support. Having that connection is invaluable and it can't be underestimated. I have seen and experienced what other schools do, and I'm confident that we do it better than anyone else. The school pride doesn't come from what it looks like on the outside, it comes from the mateship on the inside.

Regardless of the bike you ride or the clothes you wear, Salesian College helps cut through a lot of how someone looks or how big their house might be, but rather focuses on what sort of person they are. It was a badge of pride that we wore, that distinguished us from other schools. We might not do it as glamorously as other schools with big budgets, but on the inside it's what holds the boys together.