



News Release

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Paging Dr. Diesel!

Aroostook County - As a leading resource for educating and training students to enter the workforce, make a career change, or transfer to a four-year institution, Northern Maine Community College attracts a student body representing diverse backgrounds and levels of experience. However, it isn't altogether too often that the credentials of the freshmen class include a Ph.D., a Doctorate in Osteopathy, and commercial pilot's license; especially when the impressive resume belongs to a single student.

Even more surprising is the selected program of that student, 66-year-old Dr. Ronald Swanson, a recently retired physician from Castle Hill. No, Swanson isn't enrolled in personal enrichment courses to pass the time, or taking business classes to start a small business- he's already bought, run for ten-years, and sold a grocery wholesale trucking company. Rather, the good doctor has traded in his stethoscope and patient consultations at the Veterans Administration clinic in Caribou for a wrench and time under heavy machinery as a matriculating student in the diesel hydraulics program at NMCC.

A visit to instructor Bob Rice's laboratory on Monday and Friday afternoons, when first-year diesel hydraulics students are learning the trade hands-on, finds Swanson blending in with his fellow classmates, more than four decades his junior. Dressed in blue work overalls and elbow deep in the engine of a large diesel truck, he appears at ease with his environment and a most engaged learner – exactly as he wants it to be.

“Retirement is not what most people think it is. Rather than viewing it as a time to slow down and take life easy, I see it as a transition,” said Swanson.

When it comes to change, Swanson knows of what he speaks. Throughout his professional life, he has not only successfully held several different jobs but, through his own sense of adventure, has experienced vastly different careers.

After earning a Ph.D. in biochemistry from the University of Chicago in 1968 and spending two years as a post-doctoral fellow at Johns Hopkins University, Swanson joined the faculty of the department of biology at the University of Virginia. His time as a professor ended five years later in 1975, after he became disillusioned with the constant pressure to publish and apply for grants.

“I decided to strike out on my own,” said Swanson. “Since my great-grandfather was Claus Claussen, the founder of Claussen Pickles, I thought I’d like to work in the food industry. I bought a wholesale trucking company in Florida and worked in that industry for ten years. Eventually, competition with much larger companies forced me to look again for a new line of work.”

This time, rather than look to his roots for a new direction Swanson decided to explore turning a hobby, flying small aircraft, into his next profession. In 1985, he successfully earned his commercial pilot’s license and worked for two years as a flight instructor/commercial pilot.

“During this time I met a doctor who, upon hearing about my Ph.D. in biochemistry, encouraged me to apply for medical school. As a result of his encouragement, I applied and was accepted to medical school at Southeastern University in Miami,” said Swanson.

Aside from being the start of a fourth major career at age 47, Swanson’s time in medical school became a newsworthy event, when, during his final year, the younger of his two sons Don, was accepted to the same school in the same program. It marked the first-time ever that a father-son duo were enrolled in the college medical program simultaneously, an interesting human interest story that became the topic for a feature article in a major Miami newspaper.

Upon completion of his training, Swanson went to work as an emergency department physician in Swainsboro, Georgia, where he “developed quite a following among the local population.”

“The hospital administrator decided to set me up in my own private practice. I ran a general practice in Swainsboro for several years. I enjoyed the practice, but like all physicians in rural communities, I became so busy that I had no time off. I was working 24-7 and my wife insisted that I retire before the practice led me to an early death,” said Swanson.

With retirement from career number four in his sights, Swanson and his wife Randi, were left with the critical question of where to retire. He had decided that wherever they would relocate, that the region had to have four seasons, similar to the climate of northern Illinois where he was raised. After much research, the couple decided on Aroostook County and, in August of 2000, made the move north.

“I lasted in retirement only seven months before I started looking for something more to do. Retirement is not what people think! If you do not have something to occupy your time, time becomes your enemy,” said Swanson.

After spotting an ad in the *Aroostook Republican* newspaper for a general practice physician in the Veterans Administration outpatient clinic, he applied for the position and started work in April of 2001. Swanson found the position rewarding and enjoyed working with the Veterans, most of whom were about his age and many of whom he found shared many common interests.

“It was a perfect job for me at that point in my life. I worked there for just over five years. I probably would have stayed longer but recent cuts in the VA funding meant the docs were being given a much heavier work load, and I concluded that I was just too old to work myself to death,” said Swanson.

Having found his previous attempt at retirement “less than fulfilling”, Swanson began to explore what the next chapter in his life might be. At about that time, his wife Randi – then a Licensed Practical Nurse - decided she wanted to upgrade her education to become a Registered Nurse. Randi Swanson enrolled in the associate degree nursing program at NMCC, which in effect became Ronald Swanson’s introduction to the College.

“I had a chance to see the high quality of education that NMCC provided. Being a doctor, I was in a position to objectively evaluate the RN program and I was very impressed. I began to think that maybe I could use NM as a transition to retirement. I started to evaluate all the programs at the school to decide if one was right for my purposes,” said Swanson. “I wanted to do something totally different from anything I had done before and also wanted to learn something I could use.”

Much as he did when deciding to become a pilot, Swanson looked to his hobbies for inspiration; among them, cutting trees for firewood and for a saw mill that he owns. Over the years, his interest had grown into an operation that includes a tractor and skidder.

“Both pieces of equipment are diesel, and I thought it would be very useful and economical if I could service them myself. I decided that the diesel hydraulics program would fit my needs perfectly,” said Swanson. “Once again I have been very impressed with the quality of education at NMCC. I have spent many years at large universities and feel that I can recognize a quality institution. NMCC definitely provides a quality education.”

Specifically, Swanson praises his two instructors Rice and also Sonny Michaud, who is currently teaching the doctor all he needs to know about welding. With more than six decades of experience in their respective fields combined, Swanson feels he is learning from the best. For their part, the instructors are finding it equally rewarding to have a student with such a diverse background in their classes.

“He brings discipline into the classroom as students look up to him as a role model. He is very attentive, taking notes and asking questions, which in turn has the students doing the same. Ronald really wants to learn the material and inspires the other students,” said Michaud. “I wish I had him in every class.”

“He’s not a challenge,” said Rice. “He doesn’t have any experience mechanically, unlike many of the students entering the program that have either worked in related fields or taken courses in this area at the high school level, but it’s not detrimental as he is interested and picks up quickly. He brings excellent questions and gets other students interested in asking questions as well – he is a motivator.”

Fellow students, most of whom have grandfathers Swanson’s age, also appreciate having a classmate who has experienced four or five lifetimes of careers and is now amongst them as they prepare to embark on their first.

“It’s fun working with him and helping to teach him something I’ve grown up doing,” said 19-year-old Derek “Frosty” Frost of Vassalboro. “It’s funny to hear that he’s already done so many years of schooling and he’s come back for more. Even though he’s already had more experience than I’ll ever see in my life, and he’s a doctor and pilot, we still manage to joke around like equals – it’s a blast. He pokes fun at the fact that he has hearing aids and can turn them down when it gets loud in the shop.”

As Frost and his classmates look ahead to their future and what to do next, so does Swanson.

“I have begun to think about how I might use my training when I finish, and I am thinking about the possibility of buying an old piece of heavy equipment, refurbishing it, and then selling it for a profit,” said Swanson.

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