

Beloved ex-Wellington College teacher and athletics coach Neville Paul dies

By [Melissa Nightingale](#) - Senior Reporter, NZ Herald - Wellington NZ Herald

A Wellington teacher and coach who “created leaders everywhere he went” and changed the lives of the people he taught has died.

Middle-distance running coach Neville Paul, 71, died of a heart attack on Saturday after spending the day doing what he loved, coaching at the national cross-country championships in Christchurch.

His death has sent shock waves through the community, who have remembered Paul as someone who “seemed to embody joy itself” and a “man that gave it his all”.

The former physics, science, and physical education teacher left a mark on his students, many of which have gone on to break records and win awards locally and internationally.

Among his students is [gold medal-winning Paralympian Tim Prendergast](#), who said he did not believe he would have achieved what he did without Paul.

Prendergast said he was 12 when he met Paul and was still coming to terms with losing his vision to a degenerative condition which left him legally blind.



Neville Paul has coached athletics for 30 years.

“It was a really tough time for me in my life,” he said.

He had done some running in primary school and Paul approached him to join the college’s running team.

Paul treated Prendergast like any other member of the team and had an “innate” skill for working around his blindness.

Prendergast described how he would show up at the track and not know where the rest of the team was, only to hear Paul light-heartedly growl his name so he could find his way.

“He’d make a bit of a joke about it . . . it was those sorts of little things that just seem like nothing, but help a young person growing comfortable and build that sense of belonging.

“It’s times like this where the gravity of that and how much he has really impacted the trajectory of my life has really shone.

“He met me at my level. That’s what he did with everyone.”

Prendergast said he was lucky enough to have Paul as his coach through three Paralympic Games, including when he won a gold medal in the 800m T13 in Athens.

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Neville Paul started teaching at Wellington College in 1986.

He has lived in the UK for the last 18 years and has spent much of his time working with schools and organisations to inspire young people with his story. He said much of his work was “fostered by Nev”. Close friend Ben Ruthe said Prendergast was Paul’s greatest success, but in general Paul “created great men”. “At times he was raw as hell, but somehow through the rawness, most of the people that he coached were actually quite refined. I don’t know how many head boys at Wellington College he coached. Pretty much everyone who was in the senior team ended up being prefects.

“He just kept creating leaders everywhere he went.”

Paul exemplified the school’s motto, “receive the light and pass it on”, and the people he coached went on to do the same.

“He changed the way I live life, really. For me it’s doing all you can to see those around you do well.”

He wanted to thank Paul for making all of their lives richer.

“Throughout my life he ended up becoming one of my very best friends in the world.”

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Ben Ruthe (left) had Neville Paul as a groomsman at his wedding, along with fellow team members Tim Prendergast and James Coubrough.

The pair have stayed in close contact for more than 30 years, with Ruthe spending the day enjoying Paul's company at the cross-country championship the day Paul died.

Ruthe won his first cross-country title in 20 years that day. He also spent the day talking to Paul about plans for his son, Sam Ruthe, who had just broken the world record for the youngest person to break the four-minute-mile barrier.

"Nev's last full day on Earth was in the cross-country championships yelling coaching advice at me.

"It feels like full circle for me . . . I was sort of Sam's age when my relationship with Nev really started.

"He was really like a father to me."

Paul built an environment "where people could be brave, because there's never any failure".

"He really experimented on us in terms of training and approach. He tried things that were really against the grain."

Ruthe broke some junior records during that time, and said Paul had him doing sessions the same day he broke his records, a practice that "still to this day would be considered a crazy thing to do".

One of the most unusual things he did was to take a group of people training in a competitive individual sport, and turned them into "lifelong friends with the greatest team morale ever".

"The environment he created was something unbelievably special."

Neville Paul has been remembered by former students, athletes, friends and colleagues.

Paul retired from Wellington College some years ago but returned to teaching and coaching on a more casual basis and was most recently working at Rongotai College, Ruthe said.

Another friend, Allen Yip, said he had known Paul since about 1989 when Paul asked him to join him in coaching runners.

"When I started coaching at the school I realised that Neville actually had a really great relationship with these kids. He really cared about them and they really cared about him."

Yip said running was normally a somewhat "lonely" sport, but Paul turned it into a team sport.

"All the kids turned up, not just because of the sport but because of each other and because of him."

He said Paul was "quite a funny guy" who would laugh at "the most obtuse kind of joke", and had a great sense of humour.

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Yip fondly remembered playing pranks on Paul, including gathering a group to surround a portaloos Paul was in and give it “a real good shaking”. He said Paul could never look at a portaloos the same way again.

He laughed while remembering how Paul would ferry students from school to the park for training, making them lie down in the bed of the ute whenever they were near a police car.

Yip described Paul as a “genuine, proper Kiwi bloke” who cared for people, showed “real generosity”, and made sure everybody got an opportunity to train if they wanted to.



Neville Paul used to take students to training in the bed of a ute, making them lie down and hide when passing police cars.

Wellington College shared a post on Facebook remembering Paul's time at the school. He began teaching there in 1986, covering physics, science, and physical education.

“His teaching career spanned over 30 years, which resulted in him teaching generations of WC students. Many fathers and their sons will have fond memories from Neville's time as their teacher,” the post said.

“Beyond the classroom, Neville had a passion for athletics and was a talented coach in cross country and the annual McEvedy Shield athletics competition.

“Neville was a coach, mentor, and a father figure to many of our boys.

“He played an influential role in the development of athletes who went on to achieve honours nationally and internationally.”

Associate headmaster Phil Bergen told the Herald they were “devastated” to lose Paul, who he described as “one of life's characters”.

“He didn't take life too seriously . . . you never knew what you were going to get when you were talking to Nev. His topics could range from the latest coaching skills to talking about dark holes in the universe to sharemarket crashes. He had a really wide interest, but there was always a laugh.”

Paul was “such a dedicated athletics and cross-country coach” and “the driving force behind Wellington College's success” in the annual McEvedy Shield athletics competition and the national cross-country champs. His funeral will be held in the main hall at Wellington College on Sunday at 2pm. It will be officiated by former headmaster Roger Moses.

There will also be a 1km run at Wellington College at 4.30pm Saturday, open to all.

Melissa Nightingale is a Wellington-based reporter who covers crime, justice and news in the capital. She joined the Herald in 2016 and has worked as a journalist for 10 years.