
Firm Foundation for First Responders

*With three UTLX-donated tank cars,
the Firefighters Education & Training Foundation's
Safety Train helps the critical first people on the scene.*

When asked about the origins of his Safety Train, John O'Neill smiles like an overgrown kid: "I like trains and I like fire engines, so I combined the two."

The whole story is a bit more complex. In 1994 O'Neill was both general manager of a company specializing in clean-up of train accidents, and a Lieutenant in the Sherborn, Massachusetts, call fire department. The two jobs

taught him that local firefighters are usually the first respondents in a rail hazmat incident, and they are rarely trained for the job.

"A fire chief sets the tone for what will be done immediately in any rail emergency situation in his jurisdiction," O'Neill says. "The state governor can show up, but he can't overrule the local fire chief. By the time a professional

hazmat team can arrive, much of the damage has often been done. That's why it's really important for local firefighters to know what to do in these situations."

O'Neill's own response was to organize what became known as the Great Sherborn Train Wreck. Over 200 firefighters from a dozen towns converged



Safety Train founder and former firefighter John O'Neill (second from right) logs dozens of days each year helping responders learn basic rail emergency information that could ultimately save their lives.



John O'Neill explains to firefighters the type of tank car information that can be found in reporting marks.

on a simulated Conrail derailment, complete with a tank car “leaking” hazardous product. O’Neill and his associates arranged details ranging from

smoke machines inserted in the cars to pumping 5,000 gallons of water into the “dry” town for the event. Two years later a follow-up event staged a auto/train crash,

complete with a “jaws of life” rescue of a mannequin trapped in the car. Though O’Neill’s name was facetiously scrawled on the forehead of the “dummy,” the purpose of the exercise was dead serious.

Inspired by the success of these events, O’Neill wanted to establish a permanent site for training firefighters in emergency rail response, akin to the Federal Railroad Administration’s Transportation Test Center in Colorado. “I envisioned building sort of a Pueblo East,” he explains. In 1998 Union Tank Car donated one of the original cars to the program.

O’Neill soon discovered, however, that many likely participants, particularly part-time call or volunteer firefighters, could not make the trip to his Springfield, Massachusetts, training site. He literally took his show on the road in 1996 by launching Safety Train, and enlisted the support of Conrail followed by CSX Transportation to haul the UTLX car and others to towns throughout the eastern U.S. to meet firefighters where they live and work.

By now, O’Neill’s training passion became so all-consuming that he retired from active duty to form the Firefighters



Union Tank Car is one of Safety Train’s largest supporters, with donations of three training vehicles including this retired UTLX tank car.



Most Safety Train classes begin through the “schoolhouse” doorway of the classroom car, a fully-equipped training room fashioned from a former insulated beer-carrying boxcar.



Safety Train, run under the auspices of the Massachusetts Call/Volunteer Firefighters Association, is the largest hands-on rail emergency response training program in North America.

Education and Training Foundation under the auspices of the Massachusetts Call/Volunteer Firefighters Association. While still consulting professionally on environmental and hazmat affairs for railroads, his unpaid – though full-time – job became filling the endless requests for Safety Train’s services. One by one, O’Neill obtained retired railcars and raised money to refurbish them. And as he assures,

“There’s a story behind every car.”

Some cars, such as a sumptuously-restored cabooses, are purely for fun. “That car was a rust bucket that looked like it was dragged up with the Titanic,” he recalls. Since O’Neill formerly owned a business that remodeled kitchens, he directed a crew of volunteers which, over eight months, rendered the caboose to better-than-new condition with refinished

floors, new upholstery and kitchenette with custom pine countertops.

“Firefighters have brought their kids into the car, so we can add to their enjoyment by making it a family event,” O’Neill observes. “Sometimes they want to move in.”

In 2002 O’Neill and his crew of earnest amateurs completed their most ambitious project to date: converting a retired insulated boxcar into a rolling classroom, complete with heat, air conditioning and full electronics for audio-visual presentations. “It wasn’t easy convincing people to get up at four in the morning and drive an hour to spend the day inside of a boxcar,” he smiles. “You have to be crazy.” Still, the volunteers converted the former beer service car to a fully-functioning training center which took on special significance when O’Neill’s 17-year-old son died unexpectedly from a football accident. The car was dedicated to John O’Neill II, whose picture hangs near the entrance.

“I still feel that tug every time I open the boxcar door to start a class and see my son’s face,” he admits. “This just wasn’t in the plan.” O’Neill’s understanding of the fragility of life helps him convince firefighters who put themselves on the line in hazmat emergencies.

“It’s the instinct of a firefighter to move in and stop the damage,” he explains. “If they do this without thoroughly assessing the situation with a badly leaking tank car, they could be dead from vapors before they know what hit them.” O’Neill typically opens training sessions with a couple hours in the classroom that drive home three major messages:

- Understand the difference between pressure and non-pressure cars at a glance. O’Neill explains how contents under pressure, such as propane, require special caution. “If a tank car has a lot of ‘stuff’ on the top, it’s a general purpose car. Pressure cars have everything under one dome,” he explains.

- Know how to contact railroads and secure an accident site. “If you’re on an Amtrak route, you’re faced with trains



At a training session in Warwick, Rhode Island, local firefighters try their leak-stopping emergency response capping kit on a car donated by Union Tank Car.



The majority of Safety Train students are local firefighters, many of them volunteers, with no experience in hazmat rail emergency response.


barreling down that track at over 100 miles an hour," O'Neill tells students. "You'd better be sure that all the serving railroads in the area know what you're doing." He also describes how to read car reporting marks to determine contents, ownership and Chemtrec's emergency number.

- Have an emergency plan in place before you need it. "If a train in your jurisdiction derails and starts leaking product at three a.m., would you know where to immediately procure 100 tons of dirt and heavy moving equipment?" he asks. "Accidents don't usually happen when it's convenient."

"I'm not a chemist; I'm a talker," O'Neill laughs. "But as a former firefighter, I know where these guys are coming from, and I can speak their language." His pupils listen and learn. Then it's outside to vehicles such as a retired UTLX car, where firefighters climb onto manways for a hands-on look at what was discussed in the classroom. O'Neill tailors sessions to the interests of each group, such as a firefighting unit that wants to try its leak-stopping emergency

response capping kit on an actual tank car.

Thanks to donors such as Union Tank Car, which recently contributed a third car, O'Neill's Safety Train is the largest hands-on railcar emergency response training program in North America. There are now three complete Safety Trains with 26 cars on the rails, training about 5,000 firefighters per year in 22 states. O'Neill has even acquired three training passenger cars, the first of which was personally obtained for him by former presidential candidate-turned Amtrak Vice Chairman Michael Dukakis.

O'Neill admits that his success is based on "convincing people that I'm not going to go away," and credits supporters such as Union Tank Car Director of Fleet Services Leo Phillipp as the reason Safety Train can roll to a wider audience each year. "Leo is very responsive to my requests, and works to get the cars we need," O'Neill says. "I could talk all day, but it's being able to get face-to-face with the tank cars that helps these guys remember what to do when an emergency strikes." 

For more information on the Firefighters Education & Training Foundation, please visit <http://www.thesafetytrain.org> or phone John O'Neill, president, at 508.308.1216 or contact him via e-mail at sfytrain@cape.com.



John O'Neill's skills as a former kitchen remodeler were pressed into full service when he and a crew of volunteers spent several weekends creating Safety Train's rolling classroom car in 2002.