

# CALL OF THE SONG

## Longtime educator Gordon follows his heart into radio

**By MARK MCGEE**  
Special to the T-G

It is a rare occurrence when someone's life is influenced positively by a television show. It is even more unusual when the person's life is reflective of two TV shows.

But such has been the case for Shelbyville's Neal Gordon. His two favorite television shows growing up were "Welcome Back Kotter", about a former student returning to his alma mater as a teacher, and "WKRP in Cincinnati", a comedy about a radio station.

He spent 35 years as a teacher, returning home to be in a high school classroom just like Gabe Kaplan's character. In October he began his career as a radio executive as general manager for Bowman Media Company's three radio stations – WDUC (93.9 The Duck), WFTZ (Rooster 101.5) and WHMT (Whiskey Country 95.9 and 105.1).

"I wasn't looking for a change," Gordon said. "School was going great. I always considered myself the last of the company men with 35 years of working in one industry with one job in one place and one classroom for the longest time. I worked in a magical profession with some of the best people I have known."

"I always took a lot of pride in that...the consistency. My job resume looked very thin. But it has a lot of things it has entailed through the years."

Pete Bowman, owner of Bowman Media Co., called Gordon to see if he was interested in changing careers.

"I told him to give me a week to think about it," Gordon said. "But I needed less than 48 hours."

"Pete is a great guy. I am learning so much from him. This has been a great fit."

### Love of music

His love of music made the offer to leave teaching one he could not refuse. Gordon had been a part of WDUC on a part-time basis hosting a pair of music shows and co-hosting "Sports Saturday" which has been a morning staple for 10 years. His co-hosts a music show, "Time To Time" with Johnny Rodriguez on Sundays from five to 7 p.m.

"Few people get to work in two fields they are passionate about," Gordon said. "This has been a really good opportunity. I



Neal Gordon works at his new desk as general manager of Bowman Media Co.'s radio stations.



Gordon in his 35-year home — his classroom at Shelbyville Central High School.



A large group of Gordon's former SCHS soccer players gathered to honor his legacy as the program's founding coach.

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"I was a Bedford County man tried and true. I very seldom ventured outside the county. Now with the stations we serve an 11-county area. I have a great area of influence."

### Path to the classroom

After graduation from Shelbyville Central High School, Gordon attended the University of Tennessee in Knoxville where he spent weekends cheering on the Volunteers and weekdays studying for a career in medicine.

In pre-medicine as his major he needed an extra quarter to complete his student teaching requirements, graduating in December 1987.

"I thought I was going to go into medicine particularly as a pediatrician," Gordon said. "I had some success in college, but I wasn't satisfied at a certain point about my choice."

"As a junior my roommates and I were talking in the wee hours of the morning. Someone asked, 'if it wasn't for money, what would you



Gordon on the sideline during his coaching days.

want to do?" I said I would go back to my high school and teach biology and chemistry."

Then Central High School principal Mike Bone gave Gordon the Christmas present he wanted a year later.

"One morning Mike called me and asked me when I was going to graduate," Gordon said. "I told him strangely enough I was graduating that day."

"He told me he needed to see me the next Monday. He hired me on the spot, and I went straight to the classroom. It was magic."

### His coaching legacy

Gordon's established a legacy in local education both in and out of the classroom. He started the boys' soccer program in 1992 and served as a head coach until 2018 when he stepped down. He started the girls' soccer team in 1996. He also coached the golf team.

"It was a natural thing," Gordon said of his leaving coaching. "I just knew it was time. It wasn't a big decision."

Chris Fritz took over both programs. Eventually, Casey Curry, one of Gordon's former players, stepped in as head coach of the girls team.

"I was surprised as anybody when my coaching career was over," Gordon said of his decision. "Coach Fritz let me hang around as an assistant. I wasn't as good a help as I needed to be."

"I was satisfied with where things were. Sometimes you have to step aside and let younger people with new ideas and



Gordon, left, with several then-new graduates of SCHS.

new ways of doing things take your place. We don't like to do that. There is some finality in giving up your spot. There is so much reward in watching your proteges and the people you have taught be successful. It is maybe in many ways more fun than my own success."

### Embracing the changes

"Over the course of 35 years there have been highs and lows," Gordon said. "Most of the time it was pretty consistent. I enjoyed my job."

"The administrations changed but it has always been good. One of the most consistent things we have had is great teachers and great administrators the whole time. However, none of the people I started with at Central were there when I left."

In the classroom he taught biology, chemistry, physics, anatomy and physiology, honors biology and honors chemistry. He saw many changes during his time in front of students.

"Obviously, our society has changed," Gordon said. "In particular in Shelbyville we have had major changes."

"I don't think the young people have changed but maybe their talents have changed. Discipline has changed. The way students interact with each other has changed."

He also watched the physical aspects of his classroom evolve.

"When I first started classroom were organized in rows and columns and fluorescent lighting," Gordon said. "They have found many of those things were not conducive to learning so they are using softer lighting and round

tables. That would have been fanciful thinking when I went to school."

### Family support

Gordon is the son of Mary Frances and David Gordon. He and his wife Kanya, a teacher at Eakin Primary, have two daughters – Whitney and Alexis.

"When I talked to Mom and Dad about this job, they were in on it from the beginning," Gordon said. "I think they saw it as a good opportunity as well."

"My wife was supportive. There was a lot of upheaval in our lives. My sister, Marla Agee, probably said it best of all. She told me she was so proud of me being willing to take a risk. That was a good moment for me right there."

One of his former students told him one day he wanted to be "a lifelong learner". It was music to Gordon's ears as it was always his goal as a teacher to prepare his students to never stop learning new things.

"The world does change," Gordon said. "You either learn and adapt or get swallowed up by it. One of my biggest challenges was to keep growing and adapting as a professional. When you get older none of us accept change the way we should."

"They say the average person in the workforce today will have 10 different jobs. I always considered myself the last of the company men after 35 years working in one industry, one job and one classroom for most of that time. I take a lot of pride in that consistency."

He doesn't like to talk about any disappointments he experienced in the classroom, but he does

admit there are more things he would have liked to have accomplished.

"For all of the things you accomplish you think there is so much more left to do," Gordon said. "There was so much more left on the table that I could have done. There was a lot of untapped potential in myself."

"Sure, I would have liked to have gone to the state tournament in soccer. We got really close a couple of times. I would have liked to have taught a few Nobel prize winners. Maybe I could have been more inspirational. My biggest disappointment would be did I do enough?"

### A new challenge

Like his former students Gordon is learning to adapt to change at the age of 57 in his second career.

"The biggest challenge I had as a teacher was to keep growing and adapting as a professional," Gordon said. "You realize you have to put away some of the things you used to do."

"I don't think any of us, especially when we get older, accept change the way that we should. It is necessary to keep changing or sooner or later you are going to be teaching students to make buggies and harnesses. You have to keep going forward."

Which is exactly what he is doing with his radio gig.

"It is fun," Gordon said. "It is challenging. I was passionate about teaching, and I have always been passionate about music which is something I get to do through radio."

"I look forward to continuing to grow in this job. I love being around music and this is a perfect opportunity for me. It has been an adventure."

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