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Ten years of fire reporting in Lamorinda

By Nick Marnell



Finley Brown, 6, and MOFD firefighter-paramedic Lucas Lambert ride in a fire engine on the way to her last round of chemo on Dec. 21, 2015. Courtesy AJ Brown

about MOFD. The blockbuster story during her tenure - and of the past 10 years - was the Pete Nowicki pension spiking fallout. After the board miscalculated the fire chief's pension based on incorrect information he submitted, the result cost the district millions of dollars and made MOFD the national poster child for public pension abuse. Firth explained the situation clearly and without hysterics.

Regular fire reporting took off after Lucy Amaral succeeded Firth in 2009. With regular reporting came more thorough district coverage, including topics like the botched purchase of an administration building on Moraga Way, the confrontation between MOFD and the Orinda Fire and Infrastructure Renewal citizens group and the resignation of two directors after the board renewed the contract of Fire Chief Randall Bradley.

Amaral retired in 2012 and yours truly took over the fire beat. Coverage increased from regular to consistent, with two to three articles per issue, including more ConFire reporting. Starting with the Dec. 17, 2014 issue, fire moved from sporadic placement in various parts of the paper into its fixed Section A location, under the Fire Districts heading, where fire articles appear in every issue.

As our fire reporting changed hands, both districts faced their darkest moments. The Great Recession hobbled both districts' finances, with terms "structural deficit" and "bankrupt" routinely written in our news articles. The districts either closed fire stations or cut daily staffing. Both beleaguered fire chiefs resigned and returned to their roots: MOFD's Bradley to the Central Valley and ConFire's Daryl Louder to Virginia.

Thanks in part to an improved economy, new chiefs Stephen Healy of MOFD and Jeff Carman of ConFire led their districts into the black, and our reporting covered the subsequent turnaround of the rock-bottom morale that pervaded both districts. Carman made news when ConFire took over the available Contra Costa County ambulance transport contract, making it the first California fire district to make such a leap.

Our longest-running fire story ignited when the city of Lafayette threatened to secede from ConFire because of the closure of its Fire Station 16, and a back-and-forth attempt by both districts to construct a joint fire station in western Lafayette collapsed. Instead both chiefs pushed for the rebuild of fire stations in Orinda and Lafayette.

The uplifting tale of the MOFD firefighters and Finley Brown, the 6-year-old cancer patient who stole their hearts, made international news. Coverage of the firefighters' driving Brown to the hospital in a fire engine for her final chemo treatment made sound bites and headlines in media outlets worldwide. Brown continues to do well.

And just this year, we reported that MOFD elected its first female board president, Kathleen Famulener.

On a personal note, this paper took a huge leap of faith in 2012 when it hired me, an inexperienced fire reporter who did not know the difference between a fire engine and a fire truck, let alone a quint. If it were not for the help of former MOFD director Dick Olsen, it is no exaggeration to say that I would have failed. Olsen spent hours over lunches, coffee and phone calls too numerous to mention, explaining details of the

The Lamorinda Weekly made an early commitment to cover the local fire districts, and the paper boasts a fully dedicated fire beat writer, the only newspaper in the Bay Area to do so.

"Emergency service is a very important aspect of our community, and I understand the role of our fire departments," said publisher Andy Scheck, whose father worked for the fire service in Germany and who at 15 became a volunteer firefighter himself.

Our first fire article appeared on May 16, 2007. Cathy Tyson wrote about fire safety and defensible space, quoting Tonya Hoover, Moraga-Orinda Fire District fire marshal, and Contra Costa County Fire Protection District fire inspector Robert Davis. The first printed words from a Lamorinda fire official read, "We believe we all share in the responsibility for our fire safety," and that challenge imparted by Hoover rings as true today as 10 years past.

Andrea Firth, the original Orinda beat writer, pushed management to include more fire reporting, and she wrote occasional articles over the first two years, mostly

fire service and the history of our fire districts.

Olsen deserves much of the credit for the success of this section of our paper. His legacy will extend throughout the future of Lamorinda Weekly fire reporting.

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