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## Former Moraga firefighter takes on a massive challenge as East Contra Costa County chief

By Nick Marnell



Chief Brian Helmick poses with his family.  
Courtesy of ECCFPD

Brian Helmick, the interim Fire Chief of the East Contra Costa Fire Protection District, never imagined that he would work in fire service.

Helmick starred in football, baseball and wrestling at Miramonte High School but the three-sport athlete blew out his left knee at a football scrimmage before his senior year. It was the last day Helmick ever played organized sports.

A potential sports career derailed, Helmick struggled to find his life's purpose. He traveled to Mexico as a volunteer with the Moraga Valley Presbyterian Church on a homebuilding mission. Through the church he met firefighters from the Moraga Fire District. He ate dinner with them. He hung out at the fire house. He began to feel similarities between sports and firefighting.

One day the captain asked Helmick to ride along on a Glorietta Boulevard vehicle accident call. He sat in the engine and observed. On the ride back to the station, the answer Helmick had sought since his football injury finally hit him. "I found it. This is it!" Helmick said of firefighting. "The camaraderie, like among teammates. The accident call itself was the game."

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Helmick told the captain that he wanted to be a firefighter and the captain helped him land a reserve job right out of high school. Helmick stayed with what became the Moraga-Orinda Fire District for three years until 1998.

He left to join the Oakley-Knightesen Fire District, which merged with two other districts to form ECCFPD in 2002. "I wanted to work where there was more volume and a wider diversity of calls," Helmick said. "I wanted to learn, to make an impact and then go back to MOFD. 'Tell them I'll be right back,' I said. Almost 20 years later, here I am."

Helmick felt a calling to the East County community. He loved its rural feel. He became union president and worked through the ranks to serve 10 years as a battalion chief. "I have had opportunities to leave but I stayed here," he said, remaining with one of the most troubled fire districts in the Bay Area. "Our officers are expected to do a lot with a little. It's one of the reasons I came to this area," Helmick said.

It will take a leader with that perspective to handle the challenges in the district. As a result of Proposition 13, East County Fire receives an average of 7 percent of property tax allocation, unlike 12 percent for ConFire or 20 percent for MOFD. In the past five years voters have said no to two district parcel taxes, in effect telling lawmakers that it's up to them to figure out how to distribute the 1 percent that residents pay in property tax. As the region's population has grown, fire stations have closed, leaving the district with three, though officials hope to reopen a fourth station in May.

"The situation is overwhelming and complex," the chief said. "Everything is on the table, including adjusting strategy and tactics to mitigate whatever problems we have safely and effectively."

As passionate as Helmick, 40, comes across, he made clear that his career does not define him. "My identity is Christ," he said. "My success in life is determined by my bride and my three children."

Nor has Helmick forgotten his roots. "No way would I be here if I hadn't been molded by the men at the Moraga Fire District," he said.

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