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## So You Want to Be a Firefighter?

*By Nick Marnell*

Your captain directs you to perform a dangerous, hazardous duty, like climbing onto a burning roof. What do you say to her? To succeed as a firefighter-paramedic with the Moraga-Orinda Fire District, you need to know that answer, and you need to respond quickly.

Fire Chief Stephen Healy and two recently hired firefighter-paramedics, Jeremy Kshevatzky and Chris Sillers, presented a behind the scenes look at the testing process recruits endure in their quest to become MOFD firefighter-paramedics.

"First up is the written test. It covers mechanical aptitude, mathematics, medical questions, reading comprehension. You've got to be pretty smart to get through that," said Kshevatzky. "And you've got to get smart at testing. Utilize the information the department has given you, study, and prepare."

"We also want to see how they would respond to certain firefighting situations," said Healy. "You see your captain stick into his pocket a wad of cash that he picked up from the inside of a house where a fire was just extinguished. What do you do?" Was he collecting evidence? Was he trying to protect the money from fire damage? Was he stealing it?

The chief said that most of the applicants make it to the next round: the interview with the fire board. "They ask seven or eight open-ended questions, like, why do you want this job?" he said.

"They don't want canned answers," said Kshevatzky. "They are looking for honesty. They may ask, how do you respond to a patient who has made it clear that she does not agree with paying her taxes to support the fire district? (We're here to take care of whoever is in need.)"

Successful candidates then progress to a paramedic skills evaluation. "Show us that you can function as a paramedic," said the chief.

"It's role playing," said Sillers. "A panel sits at a table, a mannequin lying on the ground, they watch how I interact. They want to see how you think in a dynamic situation. Can you make the right decisions?"

The skills evaluation is a pass-fail test. For example, the candidate responds to a victim who was hit by a car. If she does not hold the victim's head still, she fails.

Qualified applicants progress to the fire chief's interview. "It's more personal," said Kshevatzky.

"Chief Healy wanted to get to know who I was, where I came from, about my family." Sillers interviewed with previous fire chief Randy Bradley. "We spent 45 minutes talking about my life, and my family experiences," he said. Note the similarity in the interview style of the two chiefs.

The final test portion is the paramedic field evaluation. "It's the most important test we take," said Sillers. Candidates ride along in the ambulances, and are monitored on how they respond to a stroke call, a pediatric call, a diabetic with breathing difficulty. This segment may take up to two weeks.

"We want to be certain that the individual has the skill sets and the potential to be a successful, long-term district employee," said Healy. "Plus, they work at a station, spending time interacting with the crews. We try to place them with a captain they match with. Also, we provide them differing perspectives. The Orinda crews respond to freeway incidents, while those at the Moraga stations would experience calls at Saint Mary's."

"A lot of people can answer questions, but they want to know if you are someone they can work with," said Sillers.

"It was very stressful," said Kshevatzky. "I was a paramedic in another county. I had to make sure that I performed according to the protocols of this county, knowing that if I don't succeed right now, I won't be here tomorrow."

Meanwhile, the candidates undergo a physical, a psychological test and a background check.

"Through the field evaluation and the background check is where we lose the most people," said Healy.

The entire testing process took seven months, said Kshevatzky, before he received a phone call

from the chief, telling him that he was an MOFD firefighter-paramedic. "I've never felt anything like it," he said. "It was the best feeling, knowing that all of my hard work had finally paid off." The correct answer to that question in the opening paragraph? "It's our job to perform tasks that many would consider hazardous and dangerous," said Sillers. It is likely that those who choose a career as a firefighter would not have it any other way.

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