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Fire Chief Paige Meyer: the Joe Montana of fire service

By Nick Marnell



Courtesy San Ramon Valley Fire

Intelligence combined with people skills, passion and a solid work ethic invariably produce an effective leader. Lafayette's Paige Meyer, fire chief of the San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District, personifies that formula, even drawing a comparison to the San Francisco 49ers' all-time great quarterback.

Early career

Meyer grew up in Stockton. He says his mother was a big influence in his life, teaching him to be the hardest worker he could be and do something you love and are passionate about.

His career in public service began as a lifeguard on the state beach circuit where he learned the severity and importance of helping those in distress. "I was doing something that mattered, with the self-satisfaction of making a difference."

On injury calls the fire department would come to the beach. The firefighters all thought Meyer had the greatest job in the world, but he felt a calling to theirs, and Meyer volunteered at the Stockton Fire Department. A true sense of purpose hit him as a volunteer.

Public Service in Sunnyvale

Meyer became obsessed to score a firefighter job. He changed his Chico major to public policy, he commuted between school and Stockton for fire meetings and he tested for every fire job that came up. He landed his first paid position in Sunnyvale, in its public service department, where he worked as both a police officer and a firefighter. "I had little or no interest in being a police officer, though I have a ton of respect for them. I was terrified. I was a firefighter in a cop's world."

He learned on one of his first fire calls the importance of thinking and working smart. Meyer attacked a structure fire, into the smoke, the fire ripping and blowing, his helmet melting, his face burning - hard core firefighters love to "feel the fire." A colleague bailed him out. "It taught me that you should never have any close calls. You need to control your atmosphere when you walk in that building. If you can't, then the victim is dead. You have to understand that there's more to putting out a fire than adding water."

Meyer was bored with police work and he applied for firefighter positions. "I got job offers from Stockton and Vallejo on the same day. I leaned toward Stockton, my wife didn't want Stockton." He took the job in Vallejo in 1997.

Sixteen years in Vallejo

His head nearly exploded with what Vallejo offered. "Diverse calls. Fires, shootings, stabbings, you name it. I loved it!" He got involved with the union on the negotiating committee. Meyer worked as a firefighter, captain and battalion chief but he twice turned down the fire chief position.

In 2011, City Manager Phil Batchelor, a published author, used his way with words when he offered Meyer the fire chief job again. "I've got a question for you," Batchelor said. "Are you going to live your life with fear, or are you going to empower yourself to be as great as you can be? Answer that question, and you'll find the answer to whether you'll take this job."

"I took it," Meyer said. "He knew what would make me tick."

Meyer was 41 and never felt so stressed out in his life. He dealt with a math nightmare. Because of its dire financial plight the city had cut the fire staff in half, responding to 13,000 calls a year with four engine companies, down from eight. Fires burned longer because it often took longer to get to them. How do you keep people safe when you're doing more with less?

"You have to do things by the book. You have to think. Everyone wants to be a hero but you can't be a hero

alone. Three firefighters might be on a fire a long time, and they have to make great decisions. You cannot operate the same way with a staffing reduction."

Meyer brought in command and control training. He had to deal with disciplinary issues. The firefighters' code? "The code is to give victims their best chance for survival, and to go home safe. The code isn't running around and getting yourself hurt or killed."

He loved leading a gritty department but he demanded that his personnel think and that they understand the job and the risks. The Vallejo crews didn't always do things the right way and Meyer had to change the mindset. If he didn't, he'd be handing a flag to someone's family member.

"I've met a couple of people who could outrun a fire, and I've met a couple of people who could grab me by the neck and drag me out of a burning building in 10 seconds. But 99.9 percent of us can't do it like in the movies."

San Ramon Valley today

The Vallejo Fire Department was just that - a city department, with Meyer the department head. He jumped at the opportunity in 2013 to lead the San Ramon Valley Fire Prevention District - an independent, special district with its own governing board. Meyer loved that he could live and die on his own merits. Again he had to change a culture.

"We had financial problems we shouldn't have had. We were building a \$10 million fire station but the firefighters were taking a pay cut. It didn't make sense!"

Meyer changed the staffing model, redeployed resources and with the help of a better economy the district solved its fiscal problems. He lowered the station cost to under \$5 million.

The district runs 90 percent emergency medical calls. "So we better be the best at it." Meyer brought in a medical director and added training, constantly trying to improve quality. He ran the district as a business.

With the new deployment, the district cardiac save rate hovers at near 50 percent. "That's where we make an impact. But we can always do better." He plans to revamp the Fire Prevention Division from an enforcement arm into a business-friendly department, and to become more involved in disaster preparedness.

"Paige is doing an excellent job," said district board president Donald Parker. "He has brought about a harmony of the board, the union and the community unlike any chief I have ever seen."

Concurred by Capt. Mike Mohun, Local 3546 president, who said that Meyer and he share the same goals: To provide a high degree of service to the community, to give all employees the opportunity to succeed and to treat people with respect. "Paige relates well to others and recognizes their strengths. With his high level of energy and intelligence, I sometimes feel that I'm working with Joe Montana," Mohun said.

Meyer spends most of his off time with his wife, two daughters and son. His oldest plays on the Campolindo High School girls basketball team, the 2017 Northern California champions. (See page C1)

"My board believes in saving lives and property. My firefighters believe the same thing. The union and the administration are second to none. That makes my life easy.

"I'm a small part of big things that are going on."

Best-selling author Michael Lewis ("Moneyball") profiled Meyer and his Vallejo performance in "Boomerang: Travels in the New Third World."

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