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Moraga's Business of the Year and Nonprofit of the Year named



From left, Mechanics Bank Universal Banker Sarn Saefong, Branch Manager Brandy Ford and Senior Universal Banker Pilar Norleen



Lamorinda CERT Program Manager Duncan Seibert

Photos Vera Kochan

By Vera Kochan

This year's Business of the Year recipient is Mechanics Bank located inside Safeway at the Moraga Shopping Center. The Nonprofit of the Year honor goes to Lamorinda's Community Emergency Response Team.

According to Moraga Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Kathe Nelson there are so many reasons why both organizations deserve the award. Mechanics Bank is "truly a community bank. Their employees can be seen at every civic event; they generously sponsor everything from Saint Mary's sporting events to the Community Fair," adding how employees are well trained, efficient and very pleasant to work with. "Mechanics has very competitive programs on all levels, and they have a great customer service department." Nelson's praises are just

high for CERT. "Their mission is to prepare the community for any and all emergencies," she said. "They offer training in all facets of emergency response, remind us to have enough water and supplies on hand, provide backyard water storage containers to offering sandbags, should we have flooding in and around our homes. It is a small group of people that provide a huge amount of very important information."

Mechanics Bank has provided over 100 years of service to the East Bay beginning with its founding in 1905, by E.M. Downer. Initially named the Bank of Pinole, it became Mechanics Bank thanks to the service it provided for the workers of Richmond's two largest companies, Standard Oil and the Santa Fe Railroad. The bank has been serving Moraga since 1996.

Corporate Officer/Branch Manager Brandy Ford has been with Mechanics for 13

years, eight of them in Moraga. When asked whether she expected to work in Moraga's branch for so long she replied, "When I first came, no. As I grew, working with my customers and the community, I couldn't see myself anywhere else."

Mechanics Bank has long been a sponsor of many organizations and events such as the Moraga Educational Foundation, the Saint Mary's College basketball team, Xenophon, Saklan School events, East Bay International Jewish Film Festival, the Kiwanis Lobster Festival and, coincidentally enough, Moraga's Business of the Year and Nonprofit of the Year event.

"I was really shocked when I saw that we were nominated," Ford stated. "By

the way the nomination was written I could tell that it came from a customer. It's truly an honor to be recognized by the community that you take pride in doing your work for."

Nonprofit of the Year, Lamorinda CERT, has been serving the community since 1997. The CERT concept was created by the Los Angeles Fire Department in 1985 and came to the forefront in 1987 during the Whittier Narrows Earthquake. By training civilians in disaster preparedness the LAFD recognized the importance of teaching citizens to safely help themselves and the neighbors within their community.

Lamorinda CERT has trained in excess of 1,000 residents under a "Train and Maintain" objective in the hopes that graduates of their Basic Training Series will continue as active members. Moraga-Orinda Fire District sponsors the volunteer-based program whose instructors, for the most part, have Federal Emergency Management Agency experience.

Program Manager Duncan Seibert wants citizens to know that their website offers emergency supplies for sale to the public. CERT operates with no salaries and no office expenses through an all-volunteer labor force. Their only outlay is the cost of running water drum and fire extinguisher programs. Anyone interested in purchasing emergency supplies such as water drums or fire extinguishers can visit the website: supplies.lamorindacert.org.

"The purpose of CERT is to teach people to be ready for disasters," Siebert stressed. "We teach people how to do it on-scene. The residents will be the true first responders."

The dinner honoring both recipients and sponsored by Aegis Living of Moraga and Mechanics Bank is scheduled at 6 p.m. Monday, Feb. 24 at La Finestra, 1419 Moraga Way (Moraga Shopping Center). Tickets are \$65 per person. RSVP by Feb. 20 as seating is limited. For more information visit www.moragachamber.org or contact Nelson (925) 323-6524.

T J Maxx thieves apprehended thanks to teamwork by witnesses

By Vera Kochan

At approximately 10:45 a.m. on Feb. 12, the T J Maxx located at 472 Center Street in the Rheem Shopping Center of Moraga fell victim to thieves.

Thanks to several witnesses pooling their observations they were able to not only get the license plate number of the getaway car, but a general vehicle description from a photo taken, along with accurate accounts of the suspects and their stolen goods. Re-counting this information to a 911 dispatcher, the witnesses had the presence of mind to note the direction the suspect vehicle was heading as being north on Moraga Road toward Lafayette.

According to store managers, the items stolen were high-end clothing and products such as cologne and perfume at an estimated worth of approximately \$500. As the suspects, one woman and two men, exited the store, security tags triggered the store's alarm system. The witnesses, each of whom was located in different

areas of the general vicinity, noticed the suspects running in the parking lot carrying armfuls of clothing still on the hangers.

Moraga Police Department officers responded to the report and notified the Lafayette Police Department who in turn spotted the vehicle, which had been reported stolen. LPD stopped the vehicle in front of Ace Hardware at 3311 Mt. Diablo Blvd. and detained four occupants until MPD units arrived on the scene.

According to the Moraga Police Department, officers recovered the property that had been stolen from the T J Maxx and the suspects were positively identified by witnesses as being involved in the theft. The suspects (Jimmy Swearingin 53, Major Mack 55, Shirley Johnson 32 and Tony Richard 44) all from Oakland, were arrested by MPD officers and later booked at the Martinez County Jail for a variety of charges including petty theft and conspiracy, probation violations and vehicle theft.

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Town Council

Wednesday, Feb. 26, 7 p.m.
Council Chambers and Community Meeting Room, 335 Rheem Blvd.

Planning Commission: Monday, March 2, 7 p.m.

Council Chambers and Community Meeting Room, 335 Rheem Blvd.
Park and Recreation Commission: Tuesday, March 17, 7 p.m.
Council Chambers and Community Meeting Room, 335 Rheem Blvd.
Moraga School District Board Meetings Thursday, March 10, 7 p.m.
Joquin Moraga Intermediate School Auditorium, 1010 Camino Pablo, Moraga
www.moraga.k12.ca.us. See also AUHSD meeting page A2



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