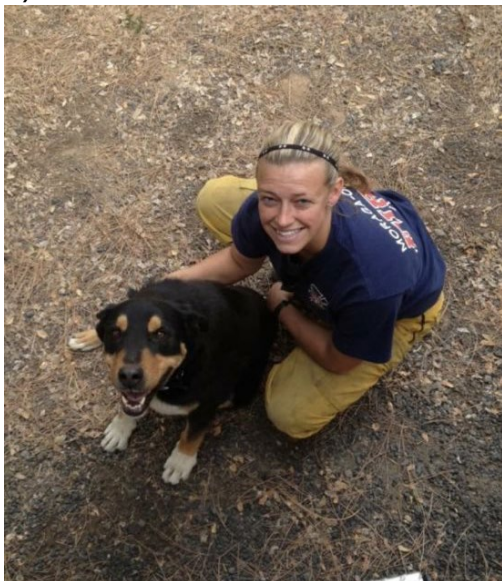


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Want a pet? Need a pipe repaired? Call MOFD. Well, sort of...

By Nick Marnell



Katy Himsl Photo provided

Firefighters enter into the profession because they are driven to help those in need, and many of the firefighters of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District continue their efforts to assist even when they are off duty. A pilot, an animal rescue volunteer, a plumber, a football coach and a drone operator shared how their outside passions help them give back and in one case, add to the ability of the district itself to help others.

Air transport

After he completes his shift, MOFD engineer Matt Epperson heads home and as he unwinds, he checks an app on his smartphone and sees that a cancer patient needs transport from her home in the Central Valley for treatment at the Stanford Medical Center. As a volunteer for Angel Flight West, Epperson is able to fly to the patient's home and deliver her to the medical center for her appointment.

"She had been spending seven hours a day each week traveling to Palo Alto," Epperson said. "Now, it's a 35-minute flight."

Angel Flight West is a nonprofit, volunteer-driven organization that arranges free air travel for children and adults with serious, but not emergency, medical conditions. Epperson, one of 1,400 volunteer pilots, flies his own plane - a Piper Lance, out of Concord Airport - and pays for all costs out of his own pocket, in order to help families receive vital treatment that might otherwise be inaccessible because of financial, medical or geographic limitations.

"I love being in the air," said Epperson, who has been flying for 10 years. "To be able to help someone and do something useful ... this is life-changing to many people." As the company website says, There's an angel in the cockpit.

Animal rescue

Katy Himsl, an MOFD firefighter-paramedic who had been volunteering at the Contra Costa County animal shelter since 2013, was running an animal rescue adoption event at a district open house when a light went off. "Why not start our own service," Himsl said, and from that spark arose It's A New Day Animal Rescue, a foster-based nonprofit organization founded in 2018 by Himsl and three other municipal shelter volunteers. The organization matches abused, neglected and unwanted animals with loving homes and families.

The company is growing, but building up a list of dedicated foster parents to temporarily house the rescued animals is the biggest hurdle the organization faces; despite the largeness of her heart, there are only so many animals Himsl can care for in her home sanctuary.

Adoptions can also be arranged. "If you want to adopt an animal, there are all types of animals for you," said Himsl, whose service has fostered even goats and tortoises. "And there are many options available to you."

One shelter dog particularly moved Himsl. "It was heartbreaking to sit with an animal who was about to be euthanized in a couple of hours," she said. Three years later that doomed dog - Bella - remains healthy and happy in Himsl's own home.

Plumbing services

Between his job as MOFD engineer and working in his father's local business when he is off duty, plus the fact that he graduated from Campolindo High School in 2001, Tim Williams is likely one of the most well-known fire district employees.

"I help out part time when he gets overloaded," Williams said of his father, who owns LeapFrog Plumbing, an East Bay company that provides plumbing services to residential and commercial customers.

Williams' plumbing skills come in handy in some of his fire interactions with residents. "Like showing them how to turn off a water heater," he said. "Or helping them with a gas shutoff if they don't know how to find the valve."

Once his firefighting days are over, Williams, who has worked with his father since he was 16, looks forward to taking over the family business. "It's a special community and through LeapFrog and fire, I understand the needs of the local residents, and I have been able to build a deep personal connection with the people here," Williams said. "And I care a lot about them."

Football coach

Another Campolindo graduate may give Williams a run for his money for most well-known MOFD firefighter. Not only did Mark DeWeese attend Campo and play football there, he has maintained his connection with the school and its football program as assistant coach of the junior varsity for the past 16 years. DeWeese runs the JV defense, comprising mostly 14- and 15-year-old student athletes. "I love being around kids in that age group," he said.

Though DeWeese works in an industry that adheres to discipline and chain of command, he conducts his football practices using a looser structure. He's not a big disciplinarian. He runs his practices as fun exercises, preferring to have a good time with the young players.

Seeing his players succeed gives DeWeese his greatest pleasure, he said, "No matter what their career path." Among his football progeny include Giorgio Tavecchio, who played in the NFL for the Oakland Raiders and Atlanta Falcons, and Tyler Petite, who played tight end with the University of Southern California. Two of his former players are firefighters: one with Alameda County and one with the state fire agency.

"I love being able to have Campo football a part of my life, creating a bond with kids who are a lot of fun," DeWeese said.

Drone pilot

Capt. Mike Marquardt has been able to convert a childhood passion into a 21st century program to help suppression personnel fight fires.

Marquardt played with remote control cars as a kid, graduating to radio control planes as he advanced through his firefighting career. "It was a great way for me to relax after work," he said.

Drones had begun to creep into the fire service, and four years ago former Chief Stephen Healy told Marquardt to look into the possibilities for MOFD. It was a simple transition from his after-work hobby for Marquardt, and after attending a training seminar in Menlo Park and consulting with the Fremont Fire Department, which had already been using drones, he ushered in the era of unmanned aerial vehicles for the district.

MOFD now has five drones and four licensed pilots, with Marquardt the drone program manager. Not only MOFD has benefited from the program but outside entities like the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District and the Moraga Police Department (but not the Houston Astros) have requested aerial help from the district.

"It's great to bring a hobby to the workplace," Marquardt said. "Lots of people think of drones as toys, and we show them that drones can be used as tools."

Reach the reporter at: nick@lamorindaweekly.com

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