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Moraga's New Chief of Police Faces Local Challenges with Confidence

By *Sophie Braccini*



After he is sworn in, Chief of Police Priebe (right) poses with Tracy, his wife of 31 years, and his son Ron, a police officer in Pleasant Hill Photo Officer Randy Pacheco

Robert (Bob) Priebe was sworn in as Moraga's Chief of Police at the April 22 Town Council meeting. After 29 years serving our Town, and despite the challenges the Department faces, the young-looking Chief feels blessed to be able to continue to serve.

If it hadn't been for his wife, Tracy, Priebe says he would never have left his previous job with the Berkeley Police to come to Moraga. She said that when he was working in Berkeley, every time the phone rang she was afraid something bad had happened.

"But I had a great time in Berkeley," remembers Priebe, "Telegraph Avenue was my beat, there was so much to do, team work was excellent, and the Department was run very professionally."

Leaving Berkeley for Moraga has not lowered the level of challenge. "Moraga is a relatively safe community, but not always for its Police Department" says Priebe. "There is crime here like anywhere else and officers have to face tough situations often on their own. In Berkeley, the department was so large that getting reinforcement was fast and easy, you never had to face a dangerous situation alone. Here, even with a radio system linking us to Lafayette and Orinda, getting help can take a while." At night, there are only two officers on duty, if one has to leave to take someone to Martinez (County jail) the officer who is left has to handle everything by himself.

More than one Moraga officer has been lost to retirement after injuries

suffered dealing with individuals resisting arrest. "One of the growing problems we are encountering here are people with mental health issues," states Priebe. "We had 32 people committed to psychiatric evaluation in 2008 and 10 cases this year so far." Priebe believes that the reduction of funding for the mental health system has required families to care for sick parents at home and as a result the number of incidents is growing.

'Budget cuts' is a popular tune in Moraga as well. When Chief Ruppenthal left, the department had only eight officers available, including Priebe. "I had to ask the team to fill so many overtime periods," said the Chief, "I never heard a complaint. They are dedicated to Moraga and worked out together the extra shifts." Now two officers who were on a long leave of absence (but paid by the Moraga Police) have been retired and Priebe was able to recruit new officers. The Department now comprises eleven individuals, with the possibility to recruit two more.

"When we hire new officers we disclose everything," says Priebe, they know they will have to take initiative, that they won't be able to count on their days off, and that sometimes there won't be any Sergeant on duty. They have to be able to make decisions on their own."

The problem with retaining Officers who become efficient and independent here is that other agencies are looking to hire them, and that resulted in the loss of two officers last year. "One of my duties is to create a work environment so people will want to stay," says Priebe. He adds that his second duty is to prepare the Department for his retirement. Priebe projects working another five years in Moraga; he wants to have a succession plan in place even if, as he says, the day-to-day putting out fires activities don't leave a lot of time for planning.

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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