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## Cal-ESAR: They've Got your Back(country)

Cathy Dausman



Background: Ryan Riggins, Matt Riggins, Richard Weerts Photo provided

Lamorinda's branch of California Explorer Search and Rescue (Cal-ESAR) is the nicest bunch of people you never want to meet—at least on the job. Cal-ESAR is a volunteer wilderness search and rescue team, and if they're looking for you—you're lost.

Chartered as Boy Scout Explorer Post 12, Cal-ESAR is a resource of the California Emergency Management Administration (Cal-EMA), and is open to anyone 15 or older. Lamorinda Cal-ESAR are your neighbors and classmates; they share a love of outdoors, a healthy respect for nature, submit to emergency response training and are willing to drop everything to head out and lend their assistance on searches. They buy their own uniforms; furnish their own supplies and transportation. We recently caught up with six Cal-ESAR volunteers-- three parents, one college grad and two teens, to learn more about the program.

Erin Grey, mother of three, is a Miramonte High and U. C. Berkeley grad. She works at REI and has guided trips for Sierra Club. The former assistant scoutmaster has facilitated emergency preparedness programs for Orinda's Sleepy Hollow neighborhood and at Orinda Intermediate School,

and is Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) and Wilderness First Responder (WIFR) trained. Grey loves Cal-ESAR "because it allows me to use the skills I've learned helping people in real need. The teamwork is unbeatable and the program allows teens to work side by side with adults."

Parent Wes Riggins loves "being out in the field on actual searches." His training and work has taken him across Northern California, from San Francisco to Mendocino counties and many other places, including Yosemite National Park. Riggins says no two searches are alike, and the group has learned never to make assumptions. He cites a search earlier this year for an Alzheimer's patient who walked away from his care facility: "As the search progressed we got a call from the Los Angeles Police Department. Our subject, without money or a car, had managed to get himself to L.A. from Sonoma." Riggins serves in the program alongside his son Matt.

Richard Weerts is an Orinda resident of 23 years. He and his wife have three sons. An "avid outdoorsman," Weerts was a Boy Scout leader for 10 years. Weerts says joining Cal-ESAR was a way "to stay active outdoors [and] use the skills I have from years of experience for something more than recreation. The Orinda group...has all been friends of mine for many years." A licensed Amateur Radio operator, Weerts, call sign W3BTO, helps keep search communication lines open by bringing his own radio. Two other members of the interview group, Wes Riggins (K2WRS) and Travis Wiley (KJ6NZE) are also amateur radio operators.

Travis Wiley is an Eagle Scout from Troop 237 and a recent Whittier College graduate. Wiley joined the group in 2009. "Cal ESAR happened to be the only search and rescue team whose training schedule fit my college schedule." Because Wiley "wanted more action" he joined the Napa County search and rescue group as well. Wiley often provides transportation for the group, in the form of his crew cab Ford F-350 truck nicknamed "The General." In spite of once driving three hours one way only to have the search called off, Wiley says "I wouldn't trade the experiences, the friendships or the hardships for anything in the world."

Miles Holland spent much of the interview time simply listening to and watching his Cal-ESAR counterparts. Grey fills in the blanks when describing Holland as "a master in the outdoors and thoughtful of other people. She says "the things that come out of his mouth [are] very insightful and observant....beyond his years in many cases." Holland, currently a senior at Bentley High School, joined the program in September, 2009, because he said "it looked like fun." He's working toward his Eagle Scout rank and plans to stay with the program until he starts college.

Matt Riggins is a Miramonte High School senior who learned about Cal-ESAR from family friend Richard Weerts. He is almost an Eagle Scout, and says he loves to "go on searches and get to go where no one else does." The younger Riggins, who plans to stay active until at least June 2012, once became hypothermic at high elevation in Yosemite. He said "if two of my team members weren't there I most likely would not be here today." Later that day Riggins helped evacuate a hiker hit by a boulder. Riggins says Cal-ESAR has "heavily motivated me to become some sort of helicopter rescue crewman."

The group agrees that becoming a Cal-ESAR volunteer is a blast, but cautions it is not a glamour job. They are self-professed "ground pounders," a mutual aid organization that serves only at the request of professional first responders. Cal-ESAR training requires committing one weekend a month, October through May. An optional nine day summer session, held at Yosemite in June, is also available. All meetings and outings are drug, tobacco and alcohol free.

An informational meeting will be held at 7:30 p.m., October 4 in the Gallery Room of the Orinda Library. Details are available online at <http://www.cal-esar.org/>



From left: Lamorinda Cal-ESAR volunteers, Pictured, left to right: Miles Holland, Erin Grey, Wes Riggins, Matt Riggins, Travis Wiley and Richard Weerts Photo Cathy Dausman



Matt Riggins, Wes Riggins on board a helicopter Photo provided

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