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Moraga-Orinda Fire District Firefighter on the Rebound

By Nick Marnell



Kelly Morris Photo Andy Scheck

Kelly Morris heard the train zoom by near the Orinda BART station and she had a premonition: "I hope there's not going to be a train derailment today, or something," she thought.

"Or something" was less than a mile away.

The 36-year-old MOFD firefighter-paramedic responded with her partner Steve Gehling in Medic 45 shortly after 9 a.m. Dec. 2 to an emergency call - a four-car non-injury pileup on Highway 24. Exiting on Wilder Road, the paramedics turned around and navigated eastbound on the freeway 1,600 feet to the accident scene, parking the ambulance by Engine 43, the first MOFD emergency vehicle to arrive.

The rain was so fierce, with the water and the mud nearly 4 inches deep, Morris said the people involved in the accident were ushered to safety into the back of the ambulance. "I've never seen it come down that hard, and I've lived here my whole life," she said.

Caltrans set up flares outside the east end of the Caldecott Tunnel, yet Morris watched vehicles continue to fly out of the tunnel. Two cars sped by the scene, fishtailing, barely missing Engine 43. The next car didn't miss. A Toyota struck the engine, skidded to a stop next to the ambulance,

and the rattled driver jumped out of the car and ran toward Morris. He indicated he was all right, likely saved by his airbag.

Gehling moved Medic 45 farther east on Highway 24, away from the fire engine and the Toyota. Morris and the Toyota driver stood near the shoulder. A Chevrolet Tahoe spun out of control along the freeway, and Morris and the Toyota driver scrambled out of its path. But the Tahoe clipped the parked Toyota, and the Tahoe flipped and rolled over, along an alternate route. "I looked back, and I could see the vehicle bearing down on me," she said. "It was like in slow, slow motion. Just like the movies."

Morris knows what it feels like to be injured. During a Campolindo High School basketball game against San Ramon Valley, Morris played through a spiral fracture of her right hand. At Saint Mary's College, she soaked her sprained ankle at halftime and returned to the court for the second half. But this was different; she was struck by a moving vehicle, and tossed into the lane of traffic. And she couldn't move.

The impact knocked the wind out of her. She fell backward, onto her tailbone. Afraid she had internal injuries, but more concerned about being hit again, Morris scooted along the road, on her elbows, until an MOFD engineer, John Whittington, and a bystander pulled her by the arms to the side of the road.

Morris lay immobile next to the Toyota driver, who appeared to her to be unconscious. A nurse, another of the growing group of bystanders, offered to help her. "I'm fine," Morris said, and she motioned toward the man beside her. "Help him."

The cars continued to whiz by, until Highway 24 was closed down. Morris was strapped onto a gurney and helped into the ambulance - the same ambulance in which she arrived at the scene - and she was transported to John Muir Hospital in Walnut Creek.

She remained at John Muir for two days. She suffered a broken right fibula- sliced clean through - three fractures in her right foot, a left knee fracture, and possibly (she's not yet scheduled for an MRI) right knee ACL/MCL/meniscus damage.

She went home to begin the torturous rehab - and to prepare for the birth of her baby, due in July.

Former Campolindo Cougars' coach Scott Espinosa-Brown described Morris as "an absolute warrior, with a tremendous work ethic."

MOFD Fire Chief Randall Bradley echoed the praise, and he stressed the compassion and dignity with which Morris treats her patients. "She always has a positive, upbeat attitude and is a valued member of our organization," he said.

Kelly Graves, her Saint Mary's basketball coach, summed up the character of his star competitor. "If anybody will make it through this," he said, "it will be Kelly."

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