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Gun Ownership in Lamorinda

Safety number one concern among local police

By Cathy Dausman



Lafayette police locker full of ammunition taken from a Lafayette case. Photo Cathy Dausman

Approximately 40 percent of Americans reported having a gun in their home, according to a 2005 Gallup Poll. So with a population of nearly 58,000, and assuming an average household size of 2.5 persons, could there be more than 9,000 guns in Lamorinda homes?

Moraga Police Chief Robert Priebe said gun ownership in Moraga is "no different than any other place." Lamorinda police chiefs are nothing if not realistic about gun use in their communities.

Lafayette Police Chief Eric Christensen had custody of a locker full of "thousands of rounds" of ammunition (each single bullet or cartridge is a round) on the day he was interviewed. The ammunition was obtained outside Lafayette city limits but pertained to a Lafayette police case.

Christensen's biggest concern is that those with mental health issues may gain access to guns. Because of this he recently sent several of his officers to specialized mental health training. He said his police department takes gun ownership and gun security very seriously.

"Carrying [a weapon] is a giant obligation," he said. "Do we run into criminals with guns in Lafayette? Yeah." Christensen recalled one residential burglary during which a collection of 50 rifles and handguns were taken, wondering "where are they today?"

"If I own a gun," he said, "I have an obligation to protect my neighbors from its burglary and [subsequent illegal] use." Lafayette does not allow the use of firearms in public places, Christensen said, and shooting a gun in the air in a back yard is dangerous.

Orinda Police Chief Jeffrey Jennings said their city has "plenty of responsible gun owners."

"There are guns in Orinda, and we have gun collectors but very few gun crimes," Jennings said. He cited FBI statistics which label Orinda as one of the safest cities per capita in California.

Those who "lawfully own a firearm," Jennings continued, "may use it to protect yourself or others from harm. There is not a gun range in Orinda and you cannot fire any weapon inside city limits for fun."

Asked about a recent police action which included the confiscation of numerous assault weapons, Jennings responded: "That ... case was not normal but does illustrate that we do have illegal activity in Orinda and everyone should be diligent in reporting suspicious behavior."

When a 65-year-old Orinda resident recently discovered ammunition in his basement, he called police. Responders sent a Travis Air Force Base explosive ordnance team to collect it.

One local man who used to hunt was asked how many Lamorindans he thought might own guns. His reply: "A lot more than you think."

According to the 2005 Gallup Poll, most gun owners used their guns for three purposes: crime protection (67 percent), target shooting (66 percent), and hunting (58 percent). The Lamorindan, who requested anonymity to prevent theft of his guns, said he "didn't grow up with guns" nor did he consider himself "a gun nut."

"My Mom's not big into guns," he said, but he felt he learned to shoot responsibly as a Boy Scout. He said the training carries over: "Responsible people with guns are responsible people in life."

Some state legislators disagree. California State Assembly member Nancy Skinner recently said, "It is easier to buy bullets than to buy alcohol, cigarettes or some cold medicines."

Skinner and other members of the California Democratic Assembly have announced nine bills, including AB 48, 169, 170, 174 and 187, crafted to help curb what they called "the ongoing epidemic of gun violence."

Those bills intend to prohibit gun trafficking, promote gun safety, add an ammunition tax and divest state pension funds from companies "that manufacture, sell, distribute or market firearms or ammunition."

The Lamorinda resident is not a fan of laws banning "open carry" or assault rifle purchases, but thinks it is a bad idea for anyone intending to protect their home and family from intruders to keep a gun, unless they are "mentally prepared" to use it.

The resident has friends in law enforcement fields, and favors additional training and education for gun

owners. He has exposed his children to guns and their proper use, while keeping his own gun collection unloaded and locked up in a safe at home. Much like James Bond in the movie "Skyfall," his handgun has a fingerprint reader; it is designed only to fire in his hands.

He believes target or range shooting is a great sport, and often sees a number of women and children participating at one local range.

Moraga Police Chief Robert Priebe said his department sometimes receives reports of promiscuous shooting in the outlying Rimer and Canyon areas, as well as on East Bay Municipal Utility District land. Firearm use without a California Department of Fish and Wildlife permit is prohibited within the town of Moraga, Priebe said.

Priebe also calls the issue of heightened gun safety awareness "a no-brainer."

Because using a weapon takes skill and practice, Priebe said the shooter needs to be able to remain focused even under stress. He advises safety and discretion for anyone who handles a gun, saying a person should "treat each gun as [if it was] loaded."

All three police departments offer gun locks free of charge to help owners secure their weapons. For more information about the Moraga Police Department's gun lock program, visit police.moraga.ca.us.

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