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Moraga Citizen of the Year Graig Crossley

By Sophie Braccini



Graig Crossley at his Moraga home Photo Sophie Braccini

Service to others and strength of character are the two qualifiers that first come to mind when thinking about the 2015 Moraga Citizen of the Year, Graig Crossley. He's led his life wanting to be useful to others - first as a teenager, serving his country in a time of war, and then as an educator in Richmond, as a Scoutmaster, and mostly in Moraga serving the community through his volunteer activities. Rather than letting a serious injury he suffered in the Vietnam War define him, he had the fortitude to choose life, and his actions command respect.

Raised mostly in California, Crossley also spent four years in Missouri and as a senior in high school he spent a year in Heidelberg, Germany. After finishing his first year at Chico State, he enlisted in the Marine Corps and was sent to Vietnam. "I didn't want to be drafted, so I decided it would be better to enlist on my own terms," says Crossley, whose father also served in the Marine Corps during World War II. Crossley was retired for medical reasons in October 1969, after losing both legs during an attack.

"One day in the hospital I heard a man who was laughing while talking with friends; he had lost both legs and had only one arm left," remembers Crossley. "I said to myself, what's my problem? I have two arms. I used him as an inspiration." Crossley returned to Chico State for a semester then spent a year at the University of Heidelberg where he met his wife, Sibylla. He graduated from CSU Chico in 1972. He continued studying, earning an MBA from Golden Gate University and became an administrator before deciding on a career in teaching. He got his credential from San Francisco State University to teach social science, history, and government in high school. He taught at Richmond High School for 18 years. "I had a sense that I was needed there," he remembers. "Lots of the kids out there had situations you would not wish on anyone."

Crossley remembers that many of the kids were not academically inclined, but he made sure they had an opportunity to learn and he pushed them. He remembers many of his students, including some he taught German to three times a week before school, went on to college and made good lives for themselves. "Those kinds of things made it worthwhile," he says.

Since Crossley moved to Moraga to raise his two sons with his wife, a preschool teacher at Mulberry Tree, he has volunteered with the town. "I wanted to give back to the community," he says. He served on the Parks and Recreation Commission in 1981 and was elected to the Town Council in 1982. "I figured I could do a better job (in politics decision making) than the people that had sent me to Vietnam," he says, "and I decided to start at the local level."

On the council where he served for 10 years, twice as mayor, Crossley developed an image as someone looking out for the public purse. During his tenure, some important topics were decided, such as letting go of the Gateway option. "It would have been a roadway from (Highway) 24 (in Orinda, where the Wilder development is located), going through the golf course," he remembers. The initial plan was that the freeway would run through Burton Valley and connect to Highway 24 next to Pleasant Hill Road. "At the time Lafayette had already gotten rid of their portion of the right of way," he adds.

Crossley recently returned to the transportation discussion when he chaired the Climate Action Committee, which focused on reducing the town's carbon footprint. "I wanted a balanced document

to come out of it that would not mandate residents to do something," he says.

Other projects Crossley participated in included the dedication of the Moraga Commons Park and the construction of the band shell. It is only fitting that now, as a Moraga Valley Kiwanian, he is helping replace the floor of that same band shell.

After his tenure on the council, Crossley ran for a position on the Board of Supervisors but was defeated. He redirected his energy toward Scout Troop 246 where he became Scoutmaster, and both his sons earned their Eagle Scout distinction. In addition to Kiwanis, Crossley now volunteers on the Park and Hacienda foundations and continues to come regularly to council meetings where he is not shy about sharing his two cents with the council.

Crossley does not let his disability stand in the way of what he wants to do, but he says it was not an easy journey. "It took 10 to 15 years for me to be relatively comfortable talking about it," he says. He served on the town's Americans with Disabilities Act committee but recommended sun-setting it. He is happy that the town decided to build an accessible path at the Commons, even if the cost seemed outrageous to him. But he highlights that it will be useful to many different groups in town: people pushing strollers, or residents with a cane or a walker. He hopes that undergrounding electrical lines along Moraga Road will free up space to construct a continuous safe sidewalk for users of every age and mobility.

"I've known Graig for 35 years," says Al Dessayer, who will be one of those speaking at the May 16 celebration dinner. "We were on the council for 10 years; we are very close friends. He's always been a very active and positive volunteer with the town, willing to help others. He is very deserving of being Citizen of the Year."

Tickets for this 37th annual Moraga Citizen of the Year event, scheduled May 16 at the Saint Mary's College Soda Center, are \$50 per person. For early banquet reservations, email Kathe@MoragaChamber.org or go to moragachamber.org.

How Are Citizens of the Year Selected?

The Moraga Valley Kiwanis has organized the Moraga Citizen of the Year celebration for years. Every year residents are asked to nominate the people they think should be recognized by sending a letter to either Lamorinda Weekly or the Contra Costa Times-Sun edition. Before a vote is cast, all nominations are collected and discussed by six people representing the Moraga Valley Kiwanis, Saint Mary's College, the Chamber of Commerce, the Times and Lamorinda Weekly, as well as the prior Citizen of the Year. This year's nominees were Graig Crossley, Linda Deschambault, Judy Dinkle, Colleen Lund, Bobbie Preston and Larry Swindle.

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