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Lamorinda Limelight: Larry Olson

By Cathy Dausman



Larry Olson Photo Cathy Dausman

Larry Olson has worn so many hats in his adult life it is a wonder you can see his face. The soft spoken Orinda man with a voice reminiscent of longtime Disney narrator Rex Allen claims to be retired, although it would be more accurate to say he continues to work but no longer gets paid.

Recently Olson flew his Piper J-3 Cub to Lompoc for the West Coast Cub Fly-in. He also owns a Cessna 172; these aircraft are not just his hobby, but tools of his volunteer trade. Olson has devoted 15 years' flight time to the United States Coast Guard Auxiliary.

"Initially search and rescue was our main focus," he says, along with an aids- to-navigation inspection of the hundreds of markers spread along the delta waters, but the focus now is on Department of Homeland Security matters and drug interdiction.

Olson and his crew also act as a

living marine resources unit; searching for whales on the move or entangled in fishing gear, and noting the location of crab and salmon vessels.

The Eleventh Coast Guard District stretches from California, Arizona, Nevada, and Utah to the coastal and offshore waters of Mexico and Central America and down to South America. Lt. Cmdr. Olson has assisted in the search for drug boats from Mexico, monitored Crescent City for high water after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami near Tohoku, Japan, and watched ships in the ports of Stockton and Oakland to ensure they remain in the proper channels.

"I like the marine life (portion best)," he says, because it is "so spectacular." Olson has been flying since he joined the Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps at U.C. Berkeley. He spent two years stationed at Spokane's Fairchild Air Force Base and joined the Berkeley police department when he returned to the East Bay, working seven years and rising to the rank of sergeant.

Olson spent 17 years as Chief of Police and Fire for the East Bay Regional Parks district, during which he also established an independent police department for the Town of Moraga and become its first Chief of Police.

In 1986 he moved to Southern California and became Carson's Chief of Police. He held that position for three years, and spent the following 10 years as Carson's city manager.

When asked about Moraga's Robert Priebe making a similar move to fill the vacancy left by Jill Keimach's departure, Olson admits "I gotta kick out of that." He said switching from having one boss as police chief to having five (city council) bosses with divergent viewpoints as city manager was tough.

"I had to learn how to count to three," said the man with a UC Berkeley criminal science degree, a master's degree in public administration from Cal State Long Beach and a law degree from Golden Gate University.

Olson also volunteered for the Alaska Iditarod for 10 years beginning in 2003. "That's why I got my ham radio license," he says. His last paid position was as executive director of Advanced Life Support for the city of San Mateo.

"Then I retired," Olson said simply, although cut back would perhaps be more accurate. Olson put aside his decades-old involvement with Rotary, and Contra Costa Kops for Kids because "it was too much."

He continues to fly for the Coast Guard Auxiliary and to volunteer with the Moraga-Orinda Fire District Support 241 team. He and his wife enjoy spending time with their four Moraga grandchildren; Olson has even coached a few of their little league baseball and soccer teams.

Asked if his grandchildren know about his lifetime of service, he says simply, "We don't discuss it a lot." Perhaps it is time they did.

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