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How Lamorindans dispose of an unwanted gun

By Cathy Dausman



Moraga Police Officer Robert Ortiz is making sure a turned-in gun is empty. Photo Cathy Dausman

It was so well tucked away I'd forgotten we even had it. "It" was a breach load, break-action J. Stevens 12 gauge, pre-World War I shotgun in poor working order. It weighed in at over six pounds, had a long iron barrel and walnut grain stock. It belonged to my husband's grandfather.

"It was never in great working order," my husband said, adding "we never fired it to my recollection." It was simply a tool his grandpa used to kill snakes or vermin on his rural property; its value more sentimental than fiscal.

Today there are more reasons (grandchildren, primarily) not to keep a gun, even a disabled one, at our house. But how does someone dispose of one safely? In Lamorinda, you bring it to a police station. "It's a service we've offered for years," said Moraga Chief of Police Jon King, adding "we're pushing it now."

King said Lamorinda residents might discover a forgotten gun while cleaning out an elderly relative's home or come across a gun abandoned on a hillside. Safe handling practices evolved quickly after a gun stolen in 2015 in San Francisco from a Bureau of Land Management officer's personal vehicle resulted in the death of a bystander. California law now requires firearms in a vehicle to be secured in the trunk or in a

locked container stored out of sight. Because of that Moraga police department is providing its officers with lock boxes to secure their department-issued firearm, King said. Lafayette and Orinda police do likewise.

Today when you purchase a firearm from a licensed gun dealer, you must either declare the make and model of the gun safe in which it will be stored or purchase a gun lock. "Many manufacturers supply a gun lock with the firearm (purchase)," King said. But sometimes safe handling means "hands off."

"Kids are curious," King said, and teaching them to treat guns with safety and respect starts when they are 5 or 6 years old. Officer Robert Ortiz, who processed my shotgun surrenders, says both children and adults ask if they can handle his handgun; the answer is always "no". He thinks of his gun as a tool, but he thinks twice before unholstering it, because he is responsible for locating every casing of every round (bullet) he fires.

I began my visit by notifying the front desk - empty handedly - that I wanted to turn in a gun. Ortiz accompanied me to the car, where he retrieved the shotgun from the trunk. He carried it to a sand-filled metal tube, placed the barrel inside and squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened, as we had hoped. That meant the chamber was empty. He broke it open and carried it inside, where it was bagged and tagged. I supplied my name, address and birthdate, and the gun was placed in an evidence locker. Grandpa's shotgun plus an air rifle and BB rifle surrendered earlier will go to a site in the central valley and be melted down.

In addition to accepting unwanted firearms or ammunition each Lamorinda police department offers free gun cable locks. All anyone has to do is ask an officer or stop by the department, Orinda police Chief Mark Nagel said.

Lafayette police Chief Eric Christensen says that maintaining a firearm in a home is a very large responsibility. "It's just not enough to hide the gun; the gun has to be secured while you are away from your home. I cannot think of a more terrible thing than for a burglar to get lucky by finding a gun and taking it with them, and then have the gun used in a crime. Everyone should ensure their firearms are locked up and inaccessible to thieves or others," he said. "We recover a lot of handguns that have been taken in other crimes. Lock them up," Christensen said.

"Treat every gun as if it is loaded, and treat it with respect," King said, adding that firearm safety is everybody's responsibility. With certain exceptions, it is unlawful to fire or discharge a firearm within Lafayette, Moraga or Orinda (ordinances 9.04.020, 9.12.020 and 8-602 respectively). And if you decide you no longer want a gun? "Call us," King said. Disposal is safe and free, no appointment necessary.

Note: Lock and disable any gun before surrendering it to police; keep it safely out of sight in your vehicle,

and alert police empty handedly. An officer will retrieve it.

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