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Bob Priebe: 38 years serving Moraga

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Bob Priebe LW archive

When Bob Priebe leaves his town manager office in a few days, he will leave behind 38 years of work history, a lifetime. Most of the manager's career developed in law enforcement until he was appointed town manager almost two years ago. While Priebe has ample right to claim retirement, his departure was still a surprise.

When he started out as a young police officer, Moraga was not his dream job. Even today, Priebe says that he was born to be a Berkeley cop. A friend who was part of that police force showed Priebe during a night ride-along how the adrenaline rush one gets on the job can make life exciting. Making people safe and arresting bad guys was the most important part of Priebe's motivation. But destiny did not have Berkeley in its long-term plans for Priebe.

Priebe was sworn in on Aug. 28, 1978 and worked in Berkeley for 18 months, and in his own words it was the most fun he ever had on the job. But one of his former police academy instructors, Tom Simms, had his eyes set on the young officer to start a brand new police department in Moraga from the ground up, and took him

on a tour of the place. Priebe remembers that the town felt more alive in the early '80s, with more retail and the fresh look of a place recently built. Simms also told Priebe that this department would one day become a Lamorinda operation.

The young man was still not interested, but Simms called Priebe's wife, Tracy, then a young mother of an 11-month-old baby. She was not as excited as her husband was about the Berkeley job; in fact, every time the phone rang, she was uneasy. The Priebes, now married for 40 years, discussed the opportunity ... and the rest is history.

When Priebe started in Moraga, 10 officers were in charge, with one part-time chief, Larry Olson, who was also working for the East Bay Regional Park District. The men had the same uniform as their EBRPD counterparts, the cars also came from that agency with patches on the doors saying Moraga, and the office was located in a trailer behind the fire station. At first, the men were independent contractors, then they created a bargaining unit, and it was not until 2006 that the department became a part of the California Public Employees Retirement System.

Priebe tested the waters for other opportunities and almost left a couple of times, but Moraga had its own interesting challenges, and the officer was regularly promoted until he became chief in 2009.

There are so many interesting stories from Priebe's Moraga life, including the time a woman came to the police department with a WWII Japanese hand grenade she wanted to get rid of that turned out to still be very much operational; Priebe keeps a piece of the grenade on his desk as a reminder of how quickly things can go wrong.

Priebe believes that his years in the police department were well spent, with a lot of good and a little bad, including a lot of educational activities and building trust with the residents. He is convinced that Moraga's independent police department costs residents much less than the officers contracted by Orinda and Lafayette through the county sheriff's office. He believes that an independent Lamorinda police force would make sense and be a good financial solution for the three cities.

When Town Manager Jill Keimach left Moraga in 2016, Priebe became interim town manager. A few days later, the culvert under Rheem Boulevard collapsed and a sinkhole formed. In September of the same year he was offered and accepted the permanent position. He says that until then, he thought that the police department was getting all the complaints in town; he got a shift in perspective as town manager.

In Moraga, residents have direct access to the manager. Priebe said he was surprised by the number of emails and phone calls he received daily from residents - some friendly, but most expressions of displeasure. He said he made a point to respond to everyone, but got frustrated at the amount of what he perceives as disinformation circulating on social media. He believes that this made his job, and his department heads' jobs harder.

Priebe explains that while the town was incorporated in 1974 with a promise for minimal government,

people nonetheless demand maximum service. He thinks that residents have to realize that they own the town's infrastructure and assets and that it requires funds to be maintained. He also believes that the level of staff today is at a minimum, as compared to surrounding communities.

Among Priebe's last public appearances were the reopening of the Rheem Boulevard and of the Canyon Bridge, where he praised his team for a work well done in spite of administrative hurdles.

He made a lot of friends in Moraga over the years. He really loved being a part of Moraga Valley Kiwanis where he discovered the pleasure of giving back. But he has no regrets about retiring. He might seek new adventures in the future, but he will certainly take a few months to enjoy life and his family.

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