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Fire chief departs with the respect and appreciation of the rank and file

By Nick Marnell



Fire Chief Jeff Carman pins a new reserve firefighter March 11 at the Briones Station. Photo Steve Hill, ConFire

Jeff Carman retires from the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District March 29, after more than five years as fire chief. Much has been written about his accomplishments with the district, but Carman often stressed that the thing that mattered to him most was his relationship with his people. He may not have realized it, but his people noticed, as evidenced by the feelings they shared about their own relationships with the chief:

"He sent out a letter when he first got here, and at the bottom, he signed it 'Jeff.' 'Oh, no!' I thought. 'Not one of these guys who is trying to be cool, and be 'in' with the rank and file.' But you know what? He genuinely is 'Jeff.' One of the most real and honest people I have ever worked with." - Capt. Josh Andrews

"I was sent on a strike team, to the Carr Fire, and we were assigned to an area near where the chief's house was (Redding). I thought everyone was kidding about that so I blew it off. But it was near his house! He invited us to his home for dinner with his family. We hadn't had a home-cooked meal in ages. He's a firefighters' fire chief." - Capt. Jason Conner

"I was on a call at a structure fire in East County. I had to cut a hole in the roof, probably not a smart thing for me to have done. 'Excellent work the other night,' Carman said, after he had seen a video of the call. 'I'm glad you got off the roof OK. In my time, I've probably been on a roof I shouldn't have been, either.' I've never heard a bad word about him anywhere in the district." - Capt. Jeff Landis

The chief's employees appreciated how he connected with them personally and how genuinely he came across. "We're both from Grass Valley. He would talk with me

about our experiences there. I've worked with good chiefs and bad chiefs and I definitely know the difference. Carman is the best one I've had." - Capt. Brent Boling

"I used to deliver pizzas in the Roseville area, and I would deliver to Carman's station (he worked at the Roseville Fire Department). Years later, he's now my fire chief. At my captain's ceremony, he remembered that and said it was a special moment." - Capt. Denis Ware

"He is by far the most approachable, down-to-earth chief ever. He blows me away. I felt an instant connection with him. I can't think of one negative thing to say about him." - Capt. Elia Alailima

"I could always be myself with him, and honest. He was always honest with me in return. I always thought that as people climbed the ladder, all that went away. But with him, it did not." - Dispatcher Jeannine Owens

Carman's respect as a leader was palpable. "I'm just a fire captain, but he always listened to what I had to say. I am also the district grant manager, and he gave me the room to make things happen. I always felt I had his backing." - Capt. Shane Kelly

"I've been a captain since 2017. At the pinning ceremony, he shook my hand, and smiled, and I could tell it was genuine. He's got an unmistakable sense of command, but still down to earth. He makes you want to do better." - Conner

"He always listened to the rank and file. He was real. I felt like I've known him for years. And he was the first chief ever to work on the Fourth of July!" - Dispatcher Margee Freundenthal

"He gave us the opportunity to bring our reserve program back to where it used to be. I felt comfortable as

a member of this organization talking about whatever I needed to talk to him about." - Capt. Sam Nichols

"He changed the culture, to provide strict accountability for our professional behavior - both inside and outside the station." - Engineer Angela Johnson-Davis

Kelly wrapped up his interview with fitting words to wrap up this article. "I offer the chief a thank you for stepping up and guiding us," he said.

Reach the reporter at: nick@lamorindaweekly.com

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