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Firewise Communities can stay steps ahead of a disaster

By Vera Kochan



Wide open spaces surround Bollinger, the Bluffs and Valley Hill Photo Vera Kochan

inexplicably dislocated his knee during swimming practice. Knowing that the drive to a hospital emergency room would take too long, she drove him to MOFD Station 42. Firefighter/paramedic Katy Himsl popped the knee back into place along with advising Richards to call 911 in the future. "I was so grateful, that I wondered what I could do for the people who keep us safe."

Richards decided that "my zip code is my mission statement" and began to visit the MOFD fire stations to get acclimated with all of their procedures and personnel. She also began to host a few open house get-togethers by inviting firefighters (and their rigs) as well as her neighbors. The events also produced discussions on fire safety and "how we look at wellness rather than illness."

Moraga's Bollinger area resident Ann Walgenbach became involved in Firewise after the October 2019 Sanders Ranch Fire. "The people who live in Bollinger, the Bluffs and Valley Hill have only one way in and out." She credits neighbor Anne Obsitnik with getting the ball rolling.

MOFD Fire Marshal Jeff Isaacs stated, "In Nov 2019, there was a passion to do more, so the MOFD decided to make that location an organized Firewise community and do an assessment of the area. While there's not an active role during a fire, it's basically for fire prevention. [Chief] Dave Winnacker was pushing for the Firewise program. Because of the wildfire threat to Lamorinda it's important to get more neighborhoods established and working together to make them safe." Isaacs noted that California provides funding to programs involved in fire prevention, and MOFD has been granted \$90,000 to distribute for that purpose.

Walgenbach and her neighbors received a not too surprising assessment from Winnacker. "The wildfire behavior will be dominated by topography and weather due to the open spaces surrounding this area. Due to the proximity of undeveloped areas immediately surrounding the community, the primary fire concern is three dimensional spread via ember cast from a distant fire." There was also concern regarding older trees and vegetation in close proximity to structures and the difficulty in evacuating 155 residences in the event of an emergency.

Last year as a first-time Firewise community, residents increased their awareness of fire danger through safety education, meetings and a neighborhood newsletter. They also stepped up maintenance of vegetation adjacent to structures by removing flammable species; conducted maintenance of duff and litter under mature trees; trimmed trees to create a minimum 5-foot air gap; removed dead tree litter and other combustible material from roofs and gutters; and held a community chipping day.

This year, residents conducted evacuation exercises and appointed block captains in addition to continually mitigating their properties. They have also joined a free group texting app called GroupMe that allows the neighbors to be in contact with each other in the event of emergencies.

MOFD is developing an ambassador program for residents to operate in their own neighborhoods for home assessment and fire safety.

For more information regarding Firewise USA visit: nfpa.org/wildfirecontact. For questions regarding MOFD visit: MOFD.org or contact: Fire Marshal Jeff Isaacs at: Jisaacs@mofd.org. For neighborhood involvement with MOFD firefighters contact: Maurarichards3@gmail.com. For information about creating a Firewise

At least 25-30 communities within the Moraga-Orinda Fire District are already banding together to make their neighborhoods fire wise. Approximately two-thirds of the communities are located in Orinda, but Moraga is making a move to catch up.

Firewise USA is a national organization that "provides a collaborative framework to help neighbors in a geographic area get organized, find direction, and take action to increase the ignition resistance of their homes and community and to reduce wildfire risks at the local level."? The program is administered by the National Fire Protection Association (est. 1896), and is co-sponsored by the USDA Forest Service and the National Association of State Foresters, but it's up to neighborhood volunteers to keep each community's program successful.

Moraga resident Maura Richards began her involvement with MOFD in the spring of 2020, when her son, Tommy,

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Maura Richards hosts first annual MOFD/Camino Pablo community open house in 2020 Photo provided

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