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Rescue One Foundation a vital provider of cutting-edge equipment to fire district

By Lou Fancher



MOFD's Stryker Emergency Patient Transport
Photo provided

Moraga's Rescue One Foundation might be one of the best-kept secrets in Lamorinda. Board President Maridel Moulton says more than once people have asked if the organization she works with is part of Tony LaRussa's ARF (Animal Rescue Foundation).

R1F is a citizen-developed nonprofit whose mission since it's founding in 1977 has been to fund and purchase vital medical and safety equipment, supplies, and first responders' educational services for the Moraga-Orinda Fire District. The small, all-volunteer group does not supply the emergency fire and paramedic departments with big equipment such as fire trucks, but instead pours its resources into ambulance improvements, drones, cutting edge weather data technology, portable command system hardware, CPR devices, decontamination systems and similar items.

"We do no actual fundraising," says Moulton. "All of the donations come from citizens who are thrilled and want to be supportive of our fire department."

Prior to R1F's formation, Moraga in particular was isolated from the ambulance services of Contra Costa County. Residents requiring an ambulance often had to use a private company for service and delays of up to an hour were not uncommon, according to R1F's historical fact gathering. Despite adequate Emergency Medical Team members to provide on-site medical services, delays in emergency transportation to medical facilities was inadequate or even life-threatening.

The Moraga Service League, a group active even before the formation of R1F, bought a van and refitted it to be an ambulance. Moulton says, "People went door to door to collect money." The R1F website fills out the history: "At the same time the Fire Chief, Don Skinner and his staff were in communication with the State of California Health Services, County Medical Office, and John Muir Hospital with the goal of obtaining the ambulance contract for the District. This was the start of community efforts to begin the MFPD Rescue Service and was the forerunner of today's Moraga-Orinda Fire District's paramedic ambulance service."

Moulton says citizen activists have continued the early groundwork laid by the Moraga Service League. "We always have invested in cutting-edge equipment," she said. "It began with the concept that we wanted this to be local. We now ask the fire chief to come to us - not for big ticket equipment like trucks and ambulances, but for state-of-the-art equipment and technology. For example, we were one of the first fire departments to have a drone."

In addition to the DJI Inspire v2 Drone that monitors fire conditions and fuel loads in remote areas and is capable of providing low-cost assistance in search-and-rescue operations, R1F has funded the Remote Automatic Weather Station (RAWS). Developed by Forest Technology Systems, the RAWS tracks real time wind, humidity, moisture content, and other data used by fire managers to predict fire behavior.

"The RAWS expands the window in which we can conduct prescribed burns for the purpose of fuel mitigation and firefighter training," MOFD Fire Chief Dave Winnacker said. "Having this tool and its ability to directly report real time local weather conditions to the BAAQMD has resulted in a significant increase in the number of days we have been able to use fire as a training and fire risk reduction tool."

Other acquisitions include the AeroClave Decontamination System and the Kubota RTV with Skid?Pump. "The AeroClave has been critical in both the efficiency and efficacy of our expanded decontamination efforts," Winnacker said. "This nets two benefits by reducing the potential for disease transmission while returning units to an in-service status more rapidly. Given the small size of our system and increased demands for pre-hospital care and transport, both have been critical to the maintenance of our service delivery. The Kubota not only increases access to remote areas, but it has facilitated our use of prescribed fire by reducing the staffing required to move firefighting equipment over rugged terrain."

Moulton, asked about the AeroClave, says, "When they were transporting patients with COVID, they had to make sure the firefighters didn't get ill. The inside of an ambulance is stuffed with nooks and crannies. They were cleaning all of those surfaces with Clorox wipes between each run. It was very difficult and time consuming."

R1F also supplied funds for the district's Stryker Emergency Patient Transport. The Stryker battery powered gurneys allow paramedics to use a hydraulic system to raise and lower gurneys with a simple press of a button. A retractable head section allows for maneuverability in tight spaces common to homes and ambulances.

Moulton says the foundation relies on Chief Winnacker and other firefighting and rescue experts to recommend equipment and services needed to bolster their capabilities. "We don't try to do their job. They know their business. We are completely separate from MOFD, but we're responsive to their needs," she says.

Winnacker says the community support the MOFD enjoys is nothing short of remarkable and "one of the true joys of being a member of the fire district." Embodied in the volunteers who make up the R1F, he feels an obligation to return the commitment. "We strive to live up to these expectations and are deeply appreciative of the generations of residents and firefighters who worked so hard to make this a reality."

For more information about the Rescue One Foundation, visit its new website at www.rescue1foundation.org/.

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