

'From Game Warden to Fire Chief: *The Call of His Life*'

Story #6 in 'Protecting Oakley Families—Residents Thank the First Responders of the East Contra Costa County Fire Protection District'

By Louise Merten



Photograph provided by Chief Henderson

Before he could ride a bike, he knew how to row a boat. Born and raised working the family business, Bob's Marina on Bethel Island, a painfully shy, very tall for his age, brown-haired boy dreamed of being a Fish and Game Warden so he could spend every day doing what he loved: hunting, fishing, and working outdoors.

Many years later, the warmth of Fire Chief Hugh Henderson's broad smile fills the room as he recounts those early dreams, the direction his life has gone, and how much it means to him to still live and work in the community that has raised him. "It's pretty awesome" Henderson says, "Most folks these days don't have that kind of opportunity." Woven into the fabric of East Contra Costa, Chief Henderson is a familiar face everywhere in the District. Serving our community through public safety for over 36 years, Henderson has witnessed the evolution of the area from farms and ranches to the bustling hometown communities that both Oakley and Brentwood are today.

Setting foot in his first fire station at the age of 17, Henderson felt the summons of public service on his life as he and his best friend eagerly agreed to volunteer at the (then) Bethel Island Fire Department. Loving the thrill that consumed him each time the radio went off until the day he responded to his first medical call. On one fateful occasion, Henderson remembers bounding out the door to race down to the station, as he had many times before. Once aboard the engine he was told that they were headed back to the house next door to his. There, on the living room floor, lay his close family friend and neighbor. Too late to save him from a heart attack, Henderson was gripped with grief. Trained in First Aid and CPR, the helplessness of seeing someone so familiar die, cemented the calling in his heart to prevent further loss, taking what was once only a thrill and turning it into a lifelong career in public service.

Over the next 30 years Henderson would work protecting the citizens of Contra Costa County as he moved through the ranks. Departing the District for a short time to work for a neighboring agency, Henderson returned in 2008 as Interim Chief, and then in 2010 promoted to the position of Fire Chief for the East Contra Costa Fire Protection District where he continues to serve to this day. Raising his family here, East Contra Costa is home. "We are a unique fire district" Henderson states, "We are fortunate that many of our firefighting personnel have grown up here or been a part of the community for years and years."

Preferring to keep the attention off of himself and more on his firefighters, Henderson beams with pride sharing how hard his team works to protect the citizens of our community. "Each of our firefighters goes out and does the work of three times the average firefighter, day in and day out." He continues, "I worry about our guys; I know they are pushing their limits because there is not enough man power and resources in our District. We truthfully are understaffed, yet we still answer calls that other agencies would have double or triple the staff to respond to, all while fighting to have the same positive outcome with less than half the resources."



Photograph provided by Chief Henderson

When asked to describe what his personnel mean to him his deep voice gets even lower and cracks a bit as he says, "They are my family, my brothers, my sisters, even my children" (referring to the youngest and often newest members of the District). Shifting the conversation back off of him, "Our firefighters continue every day to put 150% in, without focusing on who calls or how many calls they respond to each shift. Regardless of it being Christmas day, their birthday, their child's birthday or another special day of the year – they are there for us."

In the not so distant past the District has tried twice to secure funding to augment the limited revenue that is directed toward fire services. Both measures failed. When asked to recount how the notifications went out to the firefighting personnel that were cut as a result Henderson said, "It was gut wrenching and heart breaking to notify the men that they were being let go." Henderson knows full well the lack of funding puts the community at great peril.

In an unprecedented show of support of the Fire District, both Oakley and Brentwood city councils have prioritized the need for additional emergency services by placing key propositions on the November 8th ballot. Recognizing the magnitude of the crisis in our community, the cities are bringing the choice to the public to determine what level of emergency services the residents want to receive from the Fire District. "The cities are giving its citizens a chance to decide what services they can support. Based on current tax revenue the District can only support the operation of three stations, per the Master Plan we know it takes nine," Henderson stated.

Henderson concluded the interview by sharing his darkest worries as Chief -- losing a firefighter on the job and knowing it was a direct result of the lack of District resources. "The hardest thing to face in my life and career would be to notify a family member of a firefighter that their loved one lost their life protecting the community they serve; and, out here in ECCFPD the first thing that will cross everyone's mind will be 'would it have made a difference if we had had more support on the call?'"

Chief Henderson urges all residents to learn more about the ballot measures that would bring greater levels of fire and emergency medical services to our community.