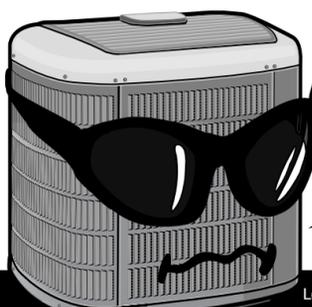


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Local 104 Union Shop

Orinda Witnesses a Tragedy

... continued from page 1

The workers were 50 feet above the ground, attempting to power wash windows on a building at 25 Orinda Way in Orinda.

"At 9:45 a.m. we heard an explosion," said Jim Bradley of Lafayette, who was in nearby In Forma at the time. "I went to the door to see what had occurred and as I glanced to the right I saw a bright flash and heard the second blast."

The Orinda Farmers' Market was in full swing down the block; vendors and market-goers came running. "The explosion was very loud," said Daisy, who sells strawberries. Market manager Janice Foust, who told us she has a background in industrial risk, had observed the window washers a short time before. "They were not very adept with the equipment," she noticed. "When I heard the explosion, I knew exactly what had happened."

Multiple calls were placed to 911; according to Moraga-Orinda Fire District Battalion Chief Darrell Lee, the first call came in at 09:48 a.m. During and after the event, several citizens voiced their concern regarding the response time of MOFD and the delay in rescue.

"It was awful to witness the human suffering, waiting for help to arrive," said a shaken Faust. "The crowd called to the men trying to rouse them. They seemed disoriented as they regained consciousness. People were shouting for them to take off their clothes because they were on fire," she recalled.

MOFD Fire Marshall Michael Mentink stated that the fire district received the call from dispatch at 9:50 a.m. and was on scene at 9:57 a.m. Orinda City Councilmember Sue Severson arrived at the market between 9:50 and 9:55 and confirmed, "Orinda Police arrived as I did, and MOFD came a few minutes later." MOFD called for back-up units and medical support. Pacific Gas and Electric was also contacted immediately to deal with the downed transmission line, but the power could not be shut off remotely.

The live line had fallen across the Rite Aid parking lot next door. "A little after 10:00, someone initiated the loud speaker announcement warning people in Rite Aid to remain inside, and others to leave the parking lot and stay back," said

Severson. The downed line "lay between the first row of parked cars and the store itself," she explained, "It's a miracle and very fortunate that no other citizens were injured. Our first responders did a great job."

Eric Navarro, on-duty watch commander for the Contra Costa Sheriff's office, said the rescue was delayed due to the precarious live-wire situation. "The cherry picker was disabled and MOFD had to maneuver safely around the still-electrified wires in order to rescue the men," he stated.

PG&E arrived on the scene at 10:20 a.m., said Mentink. MOFD Fire Captain Ken Consiglio and the PG&E representative used Truck 41's snorkel basket to reach the injured men. While PG&E monitored the wires attached to the tower, Consiglio pulled the men into his basket to complete the rescue. Mentink said that by 10:53 a.m. the victims were in the helicopter.

"The District understands the frustration of everyone watching. It was a difficult and complicated rescue," said Mentink. "It appeared to take a long time, but our primary re-

sponsibility is to assure we are not only taking care of the victims, but the public and rescuers as well."

Some witnesses ran to nearby MOFD Station 45 for help but nobody was home. "Both the engine and medic unit that are normally at Station 45 were at Pinegrove Office Park, less than a mile from the station, doing training exercises," Mentink said. "Training of this nature is essential to insuring operational readiness of our staff. When the call came in, they responded to the scene."

"It is not uncommon for fire stations to be vacant at times during the course of the day," continued Mentink. "Our staff is out in the community on a regular basis for a

variety of reasons including: emergency responses, training, inspections, public education events and other routine assignments that they may have been given. Generally speaking, the District always has firefighters available within their response area," he explained. "Most fire stations, including Station 45 in Orinda, have an emergency telephone outside the front door of the station tied directly to a dispatch center for use by the public in situations where the firefighters are out of the station."

Many customers of Rite Aid and the Farmers' Market were unable to leave the area due to the activity and the fact that their vehicles were parked in the danger zone.

Faust said people gathered at the Market to support to each other. "There was a real sense of community," she added.

The two men suffered severe burns over 75 percent of their bodies. They were airlifted to Santa Clara Valley Medical Center's burn center. At press time, both men were still in critical condition. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is investigating the incident.

The men's names have not been released, but already emails and phone calls are flying around Orinda as residents move to establish a fund to aid the two victims (we'll pass along any information we receive as plans progress.)

Margie Ryerson, our Marriage and Family Therapist, offers a few suggestions for witnesses who may be having a hard time coping with the events that unfolded on Saturday. Anyone having an unusually difficult time should seek professional help.

Witnessing human suffering is one of life's worst possible experiences. The observers of the horror at the Orinda Farmer's Market had no way of anticipating the tragedy or preparing themselves and their children. Reactions to such an awful situation can include shock, fear, helplessness, frustration, and anguish.

For children the feelings can be heightened because they lack understanding, perspective, and self-sufficiency. Encourage your child to talk about what he saw and experienced, even days and weeks after the incident. Children need to hear that this incident was a rare occurrence. They need to be reassured in every way possible that something like this will not happen again. One very healing approach for children is to help them do something active in response to the tragedy. They can draw pictures, use puppets to re-play what they witnessed, and can tell their grandparents and others about the experience. Older children can write get-well cards to the injured men and thank-you notes to the rescue personnel. Taking action can be empowering and also assist with closure for children.

If your child has nightmares, recurrent thoughts, sudden fears (even unrelated ones), or other new behavioral symptoms, it is important to contact a professional if these disturbances persist. It is natural for children to personalize a tragedy they witness and to worry that they or their loved ones could be harmed in some way. This is also a good time to focus on happy, positive events and appropriate media entertainment so that children can recapture their childhood state of mind.

For adults who witnessed the horrible scenario, it is important to be patient with yourself. You may undergo a range of emotions and reactions. What you experienced was a mixture of trauma and grief, and you may feel the effects for quite a while. Sometimes we react in unexpected ways; for example, sadness and guilt can take the form of anger or depression. And in some cases, sadness and guilt can even lead to feelings of rage. You may feel irrationally responsible for not being able to help, and then project your feelings of helplessness onto others in the form of anger and blame.

Because it is hard to feel powerless to help or to change events, you may experience heightened worry and anxiety. Temporary obsessive-compulsive behavior can be a response to feeling a lack of control. It is not unusual for people who have been traumatized, even for a short period of time, to find comfort in repetitious thoughts and activities. You may be more emotional and reactive. You may want to isolate yourself from others.

The important thing is to recognize that new and unusual behaviors are a normal consequence of witnessing a horrifying event. Usually these intense feelings and behaviors subside over time. But it helps to expect that you just may not be "yourself" consistently for quite some time. Share your feelings and reactions with others as much as possible in order to unburden yourself from what you have experienced. Be especially good to yourself during this period of recovery.

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