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Volunteers with a Higher Calling

By Cathy Dausman



David Yoon and Bill Gurnett Photo Cathy Dausman

While Bill Gurnett and David Yoon are volunteers who serve the state Office of Emergency Services under the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Office, some might say these men also answer to a higher power.

Gurnett and Yoon - Pastor Bill and Pastor David, respectively - are both ordained ministers. In addition to their "day jobs" they serve as law enforcement chaplains. Unlike a community chaplain, law enforcement chaplains are ordained, and their conversations are held in confidence.

According to its website, Contra Costa County currently has 25 law enforcement chaplains supporting police, fire and civic organizations throughout the area. In addition to his work as pastor for Landmark Missionary Baptist Church in Martinez, Gurnett volunteers 30 to 40 hours a month assisting the Lafayette Police Department. He has been there for six of his eight years as a volunteer chaplain, and is one of three lead chaplains organized under a senior chaplain. Yoon is associate pastor for Concord Korean Baptist Church in Martinez. He was sworn in as a chaplain for the Sheriff's office in October, 2012, and has been allied with the Orinda Police Department since January, 2013.

The two ride along with on-duty officers, so they see suicides, traffic fatalities, shootings and accidental death; they accompany police on death notification calls. They feel their presence lends a calming effect to the situation.

Law enforcement chaplains offer comfort to victims and their families, facilitate end of life planning, and, as Yoon said, generally "act as a sounding board" to those involved. Although there are exceptions, volunteer chaplains don't usually work inside county jails because the jails employ paid chaplains. "We bring reality together" and help victims "move forward in a healthy way," said Yoon.

Gurnett emphasized that although they are chaplains, their job is not to convert, but to help "normal people in abnormal times."

"We are with the families until they get a support system," he said. Law enforcement chaplains help both victims and first responders alike. A chaplain is often called upon to conduct an event debriefing, called a critical incident management debriefing. This process helps those affected by a traumatic event cope with its aftermath. Gurnett and other law enforcement chaplains were involved in several briefing sessions after two window washers were shocked and burned in Orinda in 2010.

Among those in attendance were then Moraga-Orinda Fire District Chief Randy Bradley and then Orinda Police Chief Jeffrey Jennings. Moraga Police Department requested law enforcement chaplain assistance after a particularly difficult vehicle fatality several years ago.

"People don't realize what police and fire [responders] go through," Gurnett said. Yoon admires first responder professionalism and wants to do more for them. "I wish I could spend more time seeing what they do," he said.

Orinda Police Chief Scott Haggard calls the law enforcement volunteer chaplain program "a great organization, very professional, and always available to help."

Asked if their work is more difficult at holiday time, Gurnett and Yoon both said no, although Yoon said it's no surprise that bad things happen. Gurnett said it is their system of beliefs and their training which helps resolve events and puts things into perspective.

"We know how quickly life can end," Gurnett said simply.

To learn more about Contra Costa County's Law Enforcement Chaplain program, contact the county's Volunteer Services Coordinator at (925) 646-4461, or visit <http://www.co.contra-costa.ca.us/index.aspx?NID=266>.

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