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It is not easy to get MOFD's busy female firefighters in the same place at the same time. From the left are firefighter-paramedics Kelly Nichols (*née Morris*) and Katy Himsl, and firefighter Julie Mulliken, with Archer, Savannah and Scarlett Nichols; MOFD firefighter-paramedic Brittany McMahon and fire marshal Kathy Leonard are pictured on the right. Not pictured: Janet Brandi-Roult

Photos Ohlen Alexander

# Don't Fence Them In

*MOFD female firefighters reject judgments, stereotypes and desk jobs*

By Nick Marnell

Talk to any of the female firefighters of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District and you will find that they share one passion: a love of their job. Brittany McMahon, firefighter-paramedic, said in so many words what each female firefighter acknowledged: "This is the greatest job in the world!"

A job with reported high rates of divorce and alcoholism? Sleep deprived, non-traditional hours? Potential life endangering emergency calls daily? Why do these women feel that a job with such severe challenges is so great?

One explanation is that they have successfully confronted

their own special challenges throughout their careers.

"When I was a little girl, they'd say 'Oh, you could be a nurse, or a teacher' but none of that ever appealed to me," said fire marshal Kathy Leonard. "I wanted something more adventuresome." She left a job in the advertising industry and joined an East Bay fire agency, where she felt the pressure of being a woman in the department from the start of her training.

"We had to run up a four story tower carrying 50 pounds, run with hoses, and carry ladders," said Leonard. "One ladder weighed 163 pounds, and it took three of us to move it. They

made the women do the ladder a lot, just to see if we could do it, to see if they could break us."

Engineer Janet Brandi-Roult said that when she started, she felt the silence when she walked into a room full of male firefighters. "You just knew it. It was more offensive to me when it got quiet. So, I tried to lighten things up. It was a boys club, but I've seen it change."

To her point about change, the younger firefighters did not mention internal challenges, but challenges from an outside environment: the public.

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## Synergy Theater Comes to Downtown Lafayette

By Sophie Braccini



Kenn Adams (left), Colleen McCormick and Clayton Dodds in the Big Room Studio Theater at Lamorinda Music. Photo Sophie Braccini

Kenn Adams is an unusual mix of mindful leader and comedian. He is moving his company, Synergy Theater, to downtown Lafayette. With him come 25 years of improvisation experience and a troupe that includes some of the best improvisers in the Bay Area. Their new home is Lamorinda Music, where they will perform the third weekend of every month. Synergy Theater plans to get some big laughs.

"Improvisation is the vibrant spontaneity of the moment," says Adams. "The improviser has to be very rooted in the moment, and open to every nuance coming from his partner." He adds that improvisers should not be thinking ahead and trying to be funny, or carry regret over something that happened in the past. "Then you're not in the now, and that's very dangerous," he

adds. Mindful meditation is indeed a part of the more advanced training and rehearsal work in Adams' troupe.

"Improvisation has three rules," he continues. "Be spontaneous; always make your partner look good - what he says is the difference between improvisation and stand-up comedy; and third, build on your partner's ideas, with no negative humor. Our culture is based on helping other people succeed first and getting laughs by pointing out positive traits."

Adams explains that when improvisers are on stage, they are caught in a paradox. "You are being completely spontaneous, but you also have an artistic goal and are constructing a story," he says. "There is a difference between spontaneity and randomness."

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