

'Two Local Women Recall the Afternoon That Changed Their Lives'

Story #2 in 'Protecting Oakley Families—Residents Thank the First Responders of the East Contra Costa County Fire Protection District'

By Barbara Santos (925) 420-6223 writepr@gmail.com



Caption described by Jessie as: OUR GUYS!! Mark Ryzac, Willy West, Bill Scott. They were part of the crew who saved our lives.

They were on their way home from shopping. It was 3:00 p.m. on Friday, September 30th. Heading down the road back home, Jessie LaChance Mellan had a car full of passengers—her daughter Kendra, then 11 years old, and three neighbor friends. They were nearly home when, out of nowhere, a young man in a Mustang crossed the divider and came at them head on. The other driver walked away with minor injuries, as did three others in Jessie's car. But in an instant that terrific accident over a decade ago changed Jessie and Kendra's lives forever.

Trained as an EMT herself, Jessie knew how bad the accident was. It would take 45 minutes for the first responders to cut her out of the mangled car. She realized both of her legs were badly shattered. "I was sure I was going to lose my foot. My ankle was wrapped around the brake pedal."

What Jessie didn't know at the time was how gravely hurt her daughter was with severe head trauma. "Her seatbelt had snapped and she rattled around the car like a pinball," Jessie remembers. The brain injury Kendra suffered in the crash mercifully put her into a coma. ECCFPD Battalion Chief Hugh Henderson, who was first on the accident scene and opened Kendra's airway, told dispatch that the 9-minute ETA for the rescue helicopter was not fast enough...she didn't have that long.

When the helicopter arrived, it landed in a field next to the accident but never turned off the rotating blades. It's called a 'Hot Load' when someone is so injured the minutes it would take to restart the engine could be the difference between life and death. Kendra was on her way to Children's Hospital in Oakland, but no one would give Jessie an update on her daughter's condition for nearly a week.

Back at the accident scene, a second helicopter team 'Stacked and Packed' Jessie—that's EMT lingo—and airlifted her to John Muir hospital. She would eventually undergo 29 surgeries in less than 10 years to repair her crushed body. Kendra's brain injury required the doctors to remove half of her brain which left her with unpredictable seizures and unable to use her right hand. Once a budding gymnast, she had to learn to walk, talk, and even eat again. But, as they would both tell you, this is not just a story about the accident. It is about the life saving help they received from East Contra Costa Fire Protection Department first responders on the scene and the ongoing support they all give each other to this day.

Nearly a year after the accident, Jessie was able to wheel Kendra's wheelchair into Fire Station #52 to personally thank the first responders who saved their lives. They both continue to visit all the local fire stations regularly and raise money for firefighter causes. Kendra, who uses a brace to walk, recently participated in the 2016 San Diego Memorial Stair Climb and made her way up 110 flights of stairs raising \$1500 for the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation.

The consequences of the accident are still a huge part of their lives, but Jessie and Kendra smile when they talk about the firefighters who saved their lives 11 years ago. They not only refer to them by their first names...but by pet names! Fire Chief Henderson is 'The Boss', Firefighter William Scott is 'Grandpa Bill' and the battalion chiefs are simply 'Batt Jeff' and 'Batt Brian'. Since Kendra occasionally has seizures so life-threatening she needs medical assistance, her mom has many of the firefighters on Speed Dial. "I call 911—then call whoever is on duty to give them details."

Jessie and Kendra are unabashedly ECCFPD's biggest cheerleaders. Jessie even has a firefighter 'badge' tattooed on her back! They are both passionate about getting the department the funds they need to continue to provide service and expand from the inadequate four fire stations that serve a decidedly less rural community these days.

"The ECCFPD is one of the most underfunded districts in the state of California. We have just three stations funded and the 90% response times are over 12 minutes. If there are simultaneous emergencies, there is no response possible at all," Jessie says of the unacceptable situation. "What if a back-up response team is coming from Concord or Martinez at rush hour...," she begins to ask and then shakes her head. It's difficult to realize that such a long response time would have meant death for both Jessie and Kendra.

It is clear the load on the ECCFPD firefighters weighs heavy on both mother and daughter. Jessie monitors emergency calls on the app, Pulse Point, and if she is in the area will volunteer to help in any way she can from helping the injured—she keeps an EMT style 'Go Pack' in her car's trunk—to directing traffic around an accident. Jessie uses a term firefighters know well—"brotherhood strong"—and explains what it means.

"Without all of the crew in ECCFPD we would not be here. I have sat with three of them in return when they had surgeries of their own, and they have come for mine when they can. We are brotherhood strong!!"