Lawyer takes city motto to heart

By RANDOM PENDRAGON
Keizertimes Intern

It is Saturday, January 20, the night of the First Citizen and Awards Banquet. Matt Lawyer is in attendance, expecting only to support fellow members of the community and help set it all up. He had no idea that he himself would be honored that night. Even as outgoing Chamber president Nate Bauer began describing the contributions of the recipient of the President's award, Matt had his mind on others.

"I was actually getting really excited because they started to tell the story about the person who was doing these things, and instantly I thought about Mark Caillier, who's been a longtime man of Keizer," Matt said. "Then they started talking about parks stuff, so I instantly thought about Clint Holland and Dylan Juran who were both in the room."

It wasn't until the last second, when they actually called his name that he believed it. "When Nate said my name, I kind of thought at first he was picking on me and then it clicked like, 'Oh man, this is real.'"

He found the experience hard to describe.

"The only other time I felt the way I'd felt was when I found out my wife was pregnant with our first kid ... If you would have told me that morning that I was going to walk in there and get anything other than the opportunity to help clean up I would have said you were full of it."

Pride

For Matt, it's hard to pinpoint exactly where his dedication comes from, stating that he's "always just kind of liked helping out." But his first taste of real volunteerism came during the Willamette Valley Flood of 1996 when he was in high school. "We helped a lot of people evacuate," Matt, who's now 35, explained. "Then, I spent the entire evacuation at Whiteaker Middle School, helping people who were sheltered there."

Matt helped distribute meals and fresh blankets and lightened the mood for kids sheltered in the school.

"It was a lot of fun getting to do that."

After serving in the Navy for just over nine years, Matt returned to Keizer.

He began working with the Claggett Creek Watershed Council where he forged much of the philosophy that would lead him through his community work. He recounts a story about doing an invertebrates study of Labish Ditch and the excitement of seeing fish return to the lake, "When I was in high school you didn't see as many… The health of the creek was poor, but people have started to take better notice locally."

To him, this was emblematic of some of the values he learned while in the Navy. "Being part of the military helped me understand just how it important is to take care of the people around you," he said. "They always taught us to be aware of our footprint."

His work with the Watershed Council highlights his views on personal and community responsibility.

"I think if we begin to start taking care of what's in our own backyard and start to share the importance of understanding the cumulative adverse effects that can happen just out of your own home," Matt explains. "If we can start to make meaningful efforts locally, maybe as it gets out to the wider world they might look at Keizer as the model city for what cities could be."

"Pride, spirit, and volunteerism is not an accident," he added. "We take a lot of pride as being citizens of Keizer, it takes a tremendous amount of spirit to the kind of work nobody wants to do."

"It just makes sense to care for where you live."

Spirit

Matt then began to get involved with the Keizer Parks Advisory Board where he quickly got involved in discussions about funding. To study for his first meeting, Matt went back and watched the previous two years of meetings. He says that the parks meetings had become pretty routine. An idea would be presented, but funding wasn't there to back it and solutions were few.

KEIZERTIMES/Eric A. Howald
Matt Lawyer assists with tree planting at the Keizer Rotary Arboretum in Keizer Rapids Park.

"We had a gentlemen [during my first meeting] stick his finger in our chest and say, 'this is what's broken in our parks,'" Matt said. "What I drew out of that was: Keizer has a lot of parks, they've been maintained by volunteers, but there's never been the infrastructure or the dollars to support the need."

Later, Mayor Cathy Clark challenged the board to begin tackling questions about funding. "Over the course of the next couple weeks, I started asking questions," he said. "I was driving the public works staff crazy 'cause I was trying to really understand what's going on."

The board came to a crossroads and was presented with the choice of a few options. The first, create a separate taxable Parks District, which Matt says "would cost a tremendous amount of money."

The second, bonds and levies could be issued, but that

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