

Darren E. Rivers Becomes Jersey City Fire Chief First African-American In 139-year History

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New COD Darren E. Rivers (3rd from left) with Captain Mark Lee, Battalion Chief James Drennan, & Deputy Chief Michael Terpak.

Darren E. Rivers remembers his first day at the fire academy, how scared he was when faced with climbing a 100-foot aerial ladder. But Rivers, a 28-year veteran of the **Jersey City Fire Department**, said he faced his fear head on stepping to the front of the line. "The same way I met the challenge that day, I'm going to meet the challenges of the Fire Department today," he said.

Rivers was sworn in as the department's 17th chief today. He is the first African-American to lead the department since its founding 139 years ago.

Sen. **Sandra Cunningham**, who Rivers called a friend, noted the historic significance of Rivers appointment, but said he shouldn't be recognized only for being the first black Fire Chief. "He has the necessary confidence, he has the necessary ability, and more importantly he didn't get here on anybody else's coat tails, We honor this man not only because he is the first, but because at this time and in this day, he is the best."

Rivers joined the department as a firefighter in 1982. He was promoted to captain in 1989 and became a battalion chief in 2001. In 2007 he became the department's first African-American deputy chief.

City Council chambers in City Hall was packed with family, friends, fire fighters and former firefighters and past chiefs, including the most recent chief, Michael O'Reilly as well as William Sinnott, Frederick Eggers and John T. Mullins. Fire Chiefs from Hoboken, Bayonne, Harrison and Kearny also came out in support of Rivers. In addition to Cunningham, Bayonne Assemblyman Jason O'Donnell, Freeholders Eliu Rivera and Jeff Dublin and City Council members Willie Flood, Viola Richardson and Michael Sottolano attended.

Two ladder trucks displayed the American flag in front of city hall and fire trucks surrounded City Hall at 280 Grove Street.

Mayor **Jerramiah T. Healy**, who gave the oath of office, said Rivers takes the helm during difficult times, when the city is working with less personnel and has no funds to fill vacancies. The fire department has lost about 100 firefighters and officers to retirements in recent months as the state moves toward capping payouts for unused sick and vacation time. But Healy said he's confident Rivers can handle the challenge. "A great chief who has a very difficult task ahead of him and we know once again he will perform in that exemplary manner."

Rivers outlined his plans for the department, which include boosting morale and focusing on service to the community. "I know morale is low and the money to run the department is even lower, but I want you to know just as with every challenge, I'll go to the front of the line," he said. "I'm going to the front of the line and I'm taking Jersey City's bravest with me."

Rivers said service is a core value of the Jersey City Fire Department and the department will truly serve the residents.

Growing up on Park Street and attending School 12, School 11 and Lincoln High School, Rivers said he never aspired to be a firefighter, but chose that path after his mother brought home an application from a job fair. A young father, Rivers said he was looking for a steady job to support his family.

Now he aspires to make Jersey City the leading fire department in the state.

"This is the beginning of a new era and it is up to us, you and I, side-by-side to restore the pride," said new Chief of Department, Fire & Emergency Services, Darren E. Rivers.