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Gordon Heights's 1st female fire chief blazes a trail while settling in



Almost 14 years after being sworn in, Moonee Rivers rose up the ranks to become the first Black female fire chief for the Gordon Heights Fire Department. Credit: Newsday / Reece T. Williams

By Keldy Ortiz

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Seventy-five years after the Gordon Heights Fire Department became the first statewide established with a Black chief and firefighters, the department has another first.

Moonee Rivers, a hamlet native, took over in January as the first woman to lead the fire department. In an interview with Newsday, she acknowledged the milestone while also taking note of challenges faced by past Gordon Heights fire chiefs.

"Being an African American female in the fire service has been a very incredible journey and I have not encountered probably half of the things or any of the things that a lot of the past individuals in this community have," said Rivers, 36, a longtime volunteer firefighter with the department she now leads. "It's very fortunate that I have not had to."

She took over for Eric Lee, who is now first assistant chief.

A 1947 fire that destroyed a Gordon Heights church led to the creation of the hamlet's first fire department. Residents sought help from fire departments in nearby predominantly white communities to put out the blaze at a Seventh-day Adventist Church. But nearly all refused to lend assistance, according to a 2006 Newsday story profiling the community.

By 1948, the first Gordon Heights firetruck was heading to fires and other emergencies — led by the first of 24 chiefs before Rivers.

"It is most significant that these pioneers of Gordon Heights community not only established the first Black fire department and fire district in New York State but did it out of a need to survive and protect their investment — their community," reads a message on the department's [website](#).

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Rivers is just the latest in a long line of family members who have either volunteered with the department or dedicated themselves to community involvement.

Her grandmother, Yvonne Rivers, 84, moved to the hamlet in the 1940s and is a retired social worker. Her mother, Jocelyn Rivers, 62, first volunteered and later worked at St. Michael's Recreation Center in Medford, where she led double dutch and youth groups.

Since the fire department's inception, 10 members of Rivers' family have been active volunteers.

"She's following a good legacy there because her grandfather was a chief and a commissioner," said Moonee Rivers' father, Ed Rivers Jr., 64, a retired teacher in the Longwood school district who grew up in Gordon

Heights.

Rivers was appointed to a two-year term as chief by the five-member Gordon Heights fire commission after being elected by a majority of the department's 46 members. The department has a \$1.6 million budget.

Among the areas Rivers is focused on are CPR classes and fire safety training for residents, as well as fire department recruiting.

"I want to educate the community and build our members," Rivers said, "but I definitely want us to be empowered by the legacy of our fire department which is to help support with fire suppression and first aid education."

One of four daughters, Rivers received a Girl Scout Gold Award, the organization's highest honor, and was recognized for her academic achievement at Longwood Senior High School, her mother said.

Rivers graduated from Temple University with a bachelor's degree in African American Studies and a master's degree in adolescent education and special education from now-shuttered Dowling College. She later received an education leadership certification at the College of St. Rose, taught at a high school in Queens, and now works as an assistant principal at Eastern Suffolk BOCES.

"Moonee has been very motivated and a strong Black woman that you would love to be your leader," Jocelyn Rivers said.

Gordon Heights Fire Commissioner Erton Rudder said Rivers' years of experience — nearly 14 — as a volunteer with the department prepared her to be the new chief.

"There's been several chiefs throughout the history of this fire department that have gone before her and they're looking down right now," said Rudder, who is the police chief at Brookhaven National Laboratory. "They're beaming with pride because of the sweat equity they had invested in this fire department and this community."

Jessica Ellerbe, second assistant fire chief of the Uniondale Fire Department, reached out to Rivers to congratulate her after becoming the first assistant fire chief. They've stayed in touch since.

"It's exciting to see someone that looks like me doing the same thing," said Ellerbe, 32, adding that she's able to inquire with Rivers about questions such as "how do you wear your hair when you go on calls or how are you dealing with attitudes."

Rivers said she wants to be a mentor at the department — the way others were for her.

"The world that we live in has shown us great examples of firsts, in particular for people of color," she said. "This department was the first at being it."

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