

Hot job, cool hires

The first African-Americans to join Denver's fire crews in seven years.

By Kieran Nicholson
Denver Post Staff Writer



La Don Williams, left, and Kendry Jackson are seen as important additions in a Denver Fire Department that is only 6 percent African-American. After recent changes in the hiring process, the number of black applicants is booming. (Special to The Denver Post / Matthew Staver)

Capt. Kevin Duncan smiled broadly as he eyed two of the Denver Fire Department's newest firefighters.

"I'm so proud of these men, let me tell you," Duncan said outside his firehouse, Station No. 10, in northeast Denver.

Kendry Jackson and La Don Williams are the first African-American firefighters hired by the city in the past seven years.

Duncan, a 25-year department veteran, serves as president of the Colorado Black Professional Fire Fighters. He acted as a mentor for the two rookies, known throughout the ranks as "probies."

The pair are among 21 Denver firefighters who graduated from the academy this month.

African-Americans made up about 11 percent of Denver's population in 2005, according to estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau. The Denver Fire Department has 904 firefighters, about 6 percent of them black.

About 70 percent of the department is white and 21 percent Latino, according to the department.

The Fire Department and city recently changed testing procedures and the hiring process, including placing a higher priority on oral interviews, to help improve minority-hiring rates.

In 2001, African-Americans made up about 5 percent of all candidates who tested for the Fire Department. In 2006, the percentage of blacks who tested grew to 12.8 percent.

The city's Fire Department was segregated until 1958, with black firefighters serving only at Station 3, 2500 Washington St., home of an all-black fire crew dating back to 1893, according to Historic Denver Inc. and city records. Since 1958, fire crews have been racially mixed.

Jackson and Williams said they don't feel any additional pressure as the city's newest African-American firefighters. Both said they're overjoyed with the opportunity and are looking forward to serving Denver and fitting in with the department.

"It's not just a job; it's a lifestyle - a career - of helping people," Williams said.

Williams, 30, had been working for United Airlines for the past eight years, but a friend and former high school classmate, Colyn Harmon, talked him and Jackson into pursuing a spot among Denver's bravest.

All three played football together at George Washington High School.

Williams' grandfather was a police officer in Chicago for 25 years. He died before seeing his grandson graduate the fire academy here.

"It's kind of sad he didn't get to see this," Williams said.

Jackson, 31, who graduated from George Washington in 1994, had been working as an electrician for the past 12 years.

He recalled growing up in northeast Denver and being enthralled as a boy when firefighters would race by on trucks with the sirens blasting and lights flashing.

"I've wanted to be a firefighter for a while now," said Jackson, who has tested for the department several times.

Now that he's made it, Jackson hopes he can inspire others to follow their dreams, as he followed his.

"Giving back to the community, you hear that all the time, but that's why people come on this job," Jackson said. "Pride is a big deal when it comes to this job."