

Memphis Fire Department promotes Gina Sweat as 1st female division chief

By Hank Dudding (Contact), Memphis Commercial Appeal
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The first time Gina Sweat drove a firetruck, she was scared to death.

"It was so much bigger than anything I'd ever driven before," she said.

Sweat was one of the first two women to become drivers in the Memphis Fire Department.

On Friday, Sweat, 42, her three years at the wheel of Truck 2 well behind her, became the first woman to reach the rank of Fire Department division chief.



Alvin Benson (left), director of fire services, jumps when James Thompson says "ouch" jokingly as the new badge is pinned during his promotion Friday to lieutenant.

**Chris Desmond
Special to The Commercial Appeal**

She was among 13 officials promoted during a ceremony at the Fire Department's Anderson Training Center on O.K. Robertson Road.

Director Alvin Benson reminded the firefighters, families and friends in attendance about the importance of savoring the ceremony.

"These are those peak moments," said Benson, who joked about the lack of pomp when he was called Downtown in 2002 and promoted to fire marshal.

"They handed me a badge and said, 'Congratulations, you can leave.'"

Family members stood to snap pictures as the firefighters accepted their promotions, while a table of food at the back of the room teased of rewards to come.

Benson urged firefighters to set high goals and never forget the respect they get from the community.

"You're never really off-duty," he said. "What you do is a reflection of the Fire Department."

Among others promoted Friday were Michael Putt, who became deputy director, the department's No. 2 position, and Keith Staples, who was promoted to battalion chief. Staples was indicted earlier this month on a misdemeanor assault charge for a spanking incident involving a family member.

Afterward, the crowd mingled as Sweat recalled her earlier days in the department with battalion chief Beverly Prye, 45, who became a driver with her in 1995.

"It was kind of unusual to see a female driving a truck back then," said Sweat. "If we'd stop, they'd say, 'Hey, there's that girl.'"

"I was just trying to be the best driver I could be."

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Fire department officials who were promoted Friday:

Michael Putt: deputy director

Daryl Payton: Mark Heath, deputy chief

Gina Sweat: division chief

Keith Staples: battalion chief

Keith Martin, Steven Payton, Robert Baker, Brandon Allen, Eddie Morgan, Mark Cupples, Edward Jeter, Jerry Alford, James Thompson: lieutenant