

Firefighter achieves rank of captain, a minority first *Honor Woodard Jr. was one of three firefighters who were promoted during a City Hall ceremony yesterday.

LAURA MEADE KIRK *Journal-Bulletin Staff Writer*. Providence Journal. Providence, R.I.: Apr 13, 1994. pg. B-01



PROVIDENCE --- Honor Woodard Jr. made history on two counts yesterday.

First, and most important, he became the first member of a minority group ever promoted to the rank of captain in the Fire Department.

Mayor Cianci, said that it was an honor for Woodard to achieve the rank of captain and said "he's a trailblazer for many, many more minority men and women who will follow him."

Woodard, 48, of Providence, who has been a firefighter since 1967, is a rescue captain, a post he has held in an "acting" capacity since passing the captain's test last year, filling in for other captains who've been sick or injured. He previously served in fire companies downtown and in the North End and Washington Park.

Kevin T. Gomes of Providence was promoted to rescue lieutenant, joining several other members of minority groups in that rank. He previously has served in Federal Hill, the East Side, North End and Washington Park. And fire trainee Richard E. Burns of Providence was promoted to the rank of firefighter to fill a vacancy.

But the ceremony focused on Woodard, starting with the opening prayers by the Rev. Robert Carter of the Congdon Street Baptist Church, where Woodard has served as deacon for about 15 years. "We come to thank you (God) for your servant, Honor Woodard, who has devoted himself to the needs of those in danger, trouble or disaster," said Carter.

Woodard truly has devoted himself to saving lives, several officials noted. He's spent 20 of his 27 years on the department working on the rescue trucks responding to everything from the Aquinas Hall fire at Providence College in December 1977 that killed 10 women, one of his saddest memories on the job, to delivering a half-dozen babies during the Blizzard of 1978, when many pregnant women couldn't make it to the hospital.

In fact, he recalls, he tied one of the baby's umbilical cords with a shoestring and that girl, who's now 10, to this day is called "Shoestring" by her family.

When he joined the department, he was one of about 10 black firefighters, and he said he never planned on being promoted through the ranks.

"I figured I'd do 20 years, and move on" to another career, Woodard said. And over the years, "Many days, I started to walk out the door. But the reason that kept me was the security of the job."

"I love the guys I work with because it's like a family," he continued. "And everybody pulls together."

Firefighter Steven Day, the union president, said of the promotion: "I think this is fantastic. . . . He's a tremendous role model" for others.

And, he added, "this gives him an excellent opportunity to shoot (to become) the first minority chief."

Was he planning to stay around that long? Woodard chuckled and said: "I'll leave that in God's hands. I'm just glad to be here at this moment."

He's now the highest-ranking member of a minority group in public safety in Providence, according to Public Safety Commissioner John Partington. He said he hopes that Woodard is "the first of many."

There are several lieutenants on the Fire Department who are members of minority groups. The highest ranking minority group member in the Police Department is a sergeant, Partington said.