

Earl Greene puts out the fires

By Nancy Watson
Sentinel-Voice

Nevada's first black fire chief, Earl Greene, doesn't want to be known or remembered as the black fire chief. He wants to be known simply as the fire chief who is sensitive to black issues because he is black.

Greene attributes his strong self image and success to a mother who had little more than attention to give to him and his eight brothers and sisters. His sense of responsibility is also attributed to his family.

Greene was the oldest child in the family whose father was in the Army and often stationed in areas too unsafe for his family, so Greene had to help care for his younger siblings.

Also, being an "Army brat" added to his confidence in other ways. Every three or four years, he was moved to a new state and faced with a new neighborhood and school where he was often the only black child.

His mother reinforced his sense of self with positive comments and his father helped make him an inclusive and integrated individual, as he carefully taught each of his children to not objectify anyone. There were no comments allowed in the home about anyone's difference.

When Greene met and fell in love with his wife, the openness his parents felt towards others was tested. They were faced with a son who was in love with some one of another race. But it was not an issue, Greene said.

Instead, they remained concerned with the same issues that always concerned them regarding their son. They wanted him to continue his education at Southwestern College, to decide where he was going with his life and to figure out how he intended to provide for himself and

a potential family.

Neither of his parents had graduated from high school, but both of them strongly stressed education and encouraged their children to achieve and do well in school.

Greene is the first one in his family (including his mother's and father's) to graduate from college. All of his siblings completed high school and five have college degrees.

Greene has been in Las Vegas for 23 years. He and his wife, Susan, moved to the city as newlyweds and recent graduates of Southwestern. Greene had earned his way through college on football scholarships and left the school with a bachelor's degree in political science.

He was soon hired by the Clark County Fire Department and ranked second in the academy's class.

He attributes a steady progression of achievements and promotions within the fire department to being "blessed by the Lord who surrounded me with the right people."

Jim Barrett, John Papageorge, Roy Parrish and Bill Bunker were each mentioned as Greene's career mentors, but his greatest strength has come from his wife, he said. "She keeps me balanced."

"She's a great sounding board and she takes great care of me and our home." He described his home as a peaceful and comfortable refuge from work and the world.

She also lead him to an opportunity he cherishes even more than his recent promotion to fire chief. Greene is pastor of Mt. Charleston Baptist Church.

A strong Southern Baptist, Susan invited him to church shortly after they arrived in Las Vegas. But, he resisted he said. He told her he

didn't want to attend a 'prejudiced' church.

Shortly after that comment, they were visited by the pastor who changed his mind. He began attending the "prejudiced" church with his wife.

As the years passed, he was requested to take on leadership roles within the church, from Sunday school teacher to deacon to interim pastor and finally, pastor. "They tricked me, now, I'm pastor of the "prejudiced" church," he said laughing.

As for the real prejudice Greene has faced in Nevada and at the fire station he said, "I just consider the source."

Not many years ago, he was denied service at restaurants and he has had food dumped on him. There are still times when, despite his promotions, he has to contend with unspoken racism. For instance at meetings with colleagues who, despite the fact that he is the chief, may overlook him or direct their comments to someone, ignoring him.

But Greene has a very strong sense of identity and an ability to "not let things like that bother me." And, since he has ranked top of the class in the tests required for his promotions, it has been hard for Clark County to overlook him.

His goal now, is to return the excellent mentoring provided to him. "It's my responsibility to mentor people to take my spot." He said he would like four or five people ready to step right into his position.

As for the responsibility of being fire chief, he said, there are times when he would prefer fire fighting. "Putting out the political fires, is much more difficult,"

he said. That's why he uses simple yet effective guidelines to run the fire department.

"We need to be clear about who we are and where we going," he said. His philosophy of management includes clarity, simplicity, openness and honesty.

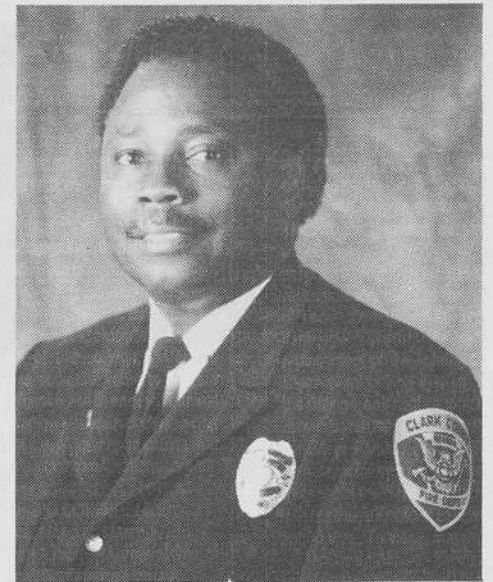
Everyone should know who is responsible for what, what is expected of them and there should no hidden agendas, he said.

"Everyone (all staff) will be treated with dignity and respect," he said. "No good ole boys — no special favors," he added.

He said he's glad the 12 year discrimination lawsuit is over. Eight firefighters were awarded a combined \$600,000 in compensation for damages they received as victims of racial discrimination.

He said the ruling in the lawsuit proves that business can not be done the way it was done years ago.

The department will provide sensitivity training on race and gender issues, however, "you can't legislate a heart," he said. But once everyone has been through the training, they'll be held accountable and those who don't want to comply will be dealt with through the proper



EARL GREENE

procedures.

Green's attitude is simple, zero tolerance for sexism, racism and hazing - a recent and ugly issue which has surfaced at the fire department.

"The fire service is a family and damaging our own family makes no sense," he said.

On the other hand, Greene plans to implement an employee assistance program and has begun the procedure for hiring a coordinator of that department.

"We rescue people, but there's lots of times we need to be rescued," he said.

He spoke of one young fire fighter who committed suicide a year ago. The tragedy was a strong and sad indication to Greene that it's imperative "to provide some support for our people."

Another reason, Greene wants an employee assistance program in place is to help firefighters and rescue personnel deal

with the more difficult issues regarding their work.

News stories list the number of victims of fire and other disasters, but they never mention the other victims, the men and women who arrive on the scene and deal with the bodies and ravages of a disaster which often includes the remains of children.

The fire department has redefined itself since the day 23 years ago when Greene joined the team. Firefighters now respond to a variety of calls such as high angle rescue, swift water rescue, technical assistance, hazardous materials as well as fire fighting.

At least 80 percent of the calls are emergency medical situations and the fire fighting staff provide help for medical emergencies that range from heart attacks to drownings. And the pressure is on.

The number of calls to the fire department has escalated as sharply as the population rise during recent years. In 1985, there were 20,050 calls or "runs," of fire personnel and equipment.

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