

FIREBREAK

The Newsletter of the Jamaica Fire Brigade

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Change at the helm

AS the saga of the Brigade continues it took an unexpected turn recently when the board of directors took, what is for them an uncharacteristically decisive position not to renew the contract of Major H. G. Benson as commissioner of the Brigade. This decision was announced during a briefing with senior officers of the brigade on Friday 25th



Mr. Whyte

February at the Ministry of Local Government Community Development and Sports.

No explanations were given but there have been speculations in the press and through the electronic media about possible reasons for the non-renewal of the major's contract. In the meantime Deputy Commissioner Frederick Whyte has been appointed to act as Commissioner with Assistant Commissioner Deniston Reid as his deputy in charge of operations.

Firebreak spoke to some senior officers in an attempt to get some insight into the changes. While not commenting on the removal of Major Benson as either good or bad most of the officers agreed that it was timely in that after ten years at the head of the Brigade he had failed to implement a clearly defined succession plan nor had he concentrated on the career development of the wider membership. They felt he spent too much time on minutiae instead of providing the type of change management required at this time.

The removal of Major Benson has created a domino effect within the

Brigade resulting in a slew of acting appointments in various areas and divisions. The membership now holds its collective breath and awaits the unveiling of the new vision by the current leadership.

Amnesty declared

In one of his first moves as Acting Commissioner, Mr. F. Whyte declared an amnesty on all disciplinary charges and suspensions that are not affected by matters currently before the courts.

Speaking at the first in a series of area conferences at the York Park Fire Station on Wednesday 16th March Mr. Whyte spoke to the need to give each offender a clean slate as all persons should now recommit themselves to helping the organization survive the difficult times, and to do their part to restore the image of the Brigade.

The announcement was met with thunderous applause although there were some concerns about the details of how this amnesty would work. These details we are told will be announced later.

Other meetings are planned for Area II on 23rd March, Area IV 30th and 31st March and area III on 14 April.

Wage agreement signed

On Wednesday 2nd March 2005 the wage agreement for the contract period July 2003 to June 2005 was signed between the management of the Brigade and the trade unions at the Ministry of Local government Community Development and Sports, Hagley Park Road in Kingston.

The agreement is that the new rates will be implemented in July 2005 while the retroactive portion is scheduled for payment in October. The unions however have given notice that they will be negotiating to have the payments of the outstanding money brought forward. Signing for the

Brigade were Chairman of the Board of Directors Mr. D. T. Brown and Acting Commissioner F. Whyte while the unions were represented by Mr. Osmond Campbell, Mrs. Helen Davis-Whyte and a number of union delegates.

New thrust in training

The long awaited concentration on in-service training is about to become a reality as the Brigade is now offering scholarships for places on the **Public Sector Senior Management Development Programme** being offered by the Management Institute for National Development (MIND).

A limited number of spaces have been secured on this programme that is targeted to senior management personnel in government and is delivered in conjunction with the Cabinet Office. The course is designed to equip participants with in-depth knowledge of the complexities and intricacies of government and to generally prepare them for more senior positions in the public service.

Applications are being invited from persons in the ranks of senior deputy superintendent and higher who should possess a first degree from an accredited institution and/or at least three years experience in a senior management position. These applications must be submitted on MIND Course Application forms, available from Brigade Headquarters.

Completed applications must be returned by 15 April 2005 to the Customer Service Manager, MIND, 235A Old Hope Road in Kingston.

Accidents continue

Fire-fighters responding to a call in Manchester on Monday 21st March were victims of a motor vehicle accident as the 5-50 appliance in which they were travelling over turned

on the Pen Hill Main road just outside Mizpah.

Reports are that a fire call was received for Hopeton Gardens a district that would normally have been covered by Mandeville Station. However, the Christiania unit had to respond and unfortunately had the accident while proceeding. seven firefighters were injured and were taken to the Percy Junior Hospital where Firefighter Christopher Northover was admitted while the others were treated and sent home.

In January six firefighters were also injured in Trelawny while they responded to an emergency.

Water supply commissioned

A 20,000gallon water tank was recently installed and commissioned at the Mandeville Fire Station, Manchester Division recently. The decision to install the storage tank at the station to provide a reliably supply of water for firefighting purposes came after repeated calls by politicians, members of the public and other stakeholders about the poor state of water supplies in the parish capital. The tank is to provide a reliable supply of water for firefighting purposes strategically placed in the town.

The handing over ceremony was attended by the junior minister in the ministry of water the Hon. Harry Douglas, and member of parliament the Hon. John Junor who was the guest speaker, while the Brigade was represented by Senior Deputy Superintendent John Forrester who is currently acting as the Area Officer and Assistant Superintendent Lansford Williams.

Firefighting – a female perspective

Heather Williams

One of the many challenges faced by organizations, is the matter of diversity in the workforce. The fact that different cultures, ethnicity, and a

larger percentage of women than previously now form a significant part of the workforce, present challenges to the management and development of organizations. The Jamaica Fire Brigade and indeed fire services worldwide existed for a long time without women as part of the workforce and now have to deal with the influx of women. In this article I will explore the career of fire fighting in the Jamaica Fire Brigade from the female perspective. How did we get here? Are our roles clearly defined? Are we seen as a valuable part of the workforce or are we like certain ethnic minority groups in movies – just here in the form ‘affirmative action’ which in my opinion is just another form of tokenism. Do we have to combat the proverbial ‘glass ceiling’ or does the opportunity exist for women to rise to the upper echelon of the Fire Brigade? What of sexual harassment, does it exist in the Brigade? These are some of the issues I sought to examine through a survey of fire fighters across the island. The sample included persons from the rank of Assistant Commissioner to Firefighter who were chosen randomly.

Presently, there are on thousand four hundred and ninety uniformed members in the Brigade, one hundred and twenty eight of whom are females. The sample used for the survey was twenty five females and twenty nine males – just over 3% of the uniformed staff.

There were women in the Fire Brigade long before 1995 when females were first recruited specifically for operational duties. Prior to this when the parish council fire services existed, women were employed to perform duties as Watch-room Attendants. The first such woman to serve in the Kingston Fire Brigade was Avis Pryce who began her tour of duty on September 14, 1957 nearly five decades ago. Women in the brigade have come a long way since 1957 as prior to 1995 when the parish council fire services were amalgamated to form the Jamaica Fire Brigade, women

did not receive the same pay as males and the highest rank attained by a female was that of District Officer.

Presently just over 12% of females in the Brigade are in the Officer ranks a majority of whom by virtue of tenure will be exiting the service in just a matter of years. This means on the one hand that there will be vacancies to be filled but on the other hand, as it is there are not enough females to be considered for these positions when they do become available for two reasons:

1. Just fewer than 82% of the females in the brigade are below the rank of Sergeant.
2. The pace at which promotional examinations are carried out leaves much to be desired, with the last exam being conducted exactly three years ago.

Fire fighting is by no means an easy career when you are on the frontline, regardless of your rank, position or gender. We are all aware however, of the traditional organisational culture of the fire brigade where leadership roles were established by men for men. Even though in recent years women have been promoted to more senior ranks the highest presently being Senior Deputy Superintendent and a few selected for overseas training, should young female firefighters rest assured that this new phenomenon is not just a one day wonder, or is this a sure sign that the opportunity does exist for women to reach the highest level of the organisation’s structure? How prepared are we for the opportunities when they become available though? Until quite recently, one of the considerations when selecting and subsequently choosing persons for promotions, was tenure. Now persons have to possess some level of qualification in order to be considered for promotion to especially administrative positions. The number of females interviewed have service ranging from a total of two to ten years with a total of 56% presently pursuing some form of educational upgrade and

conversely just over half of the males interviewed were also making themselves more marketable, so watch out ladies don't get complacent now! The point is, in order for us not be marginalised when these opportunities present themselves we have to be qualified but let me also emphasise that qualification in this sense does not just mean a certificate, diploma or a degree for that matter but job knowledge is also a key factor in being qualified.

How do our peers and superiors in terms of our conduct, deportment, attitude towards the job and our overall abilities view us? When asked to describe their working relationship with their female co-workers and vice versa, the results combined showed that 59% of the total number of persons interviewed (males and females) enjoy an excellent working relationship, while 38% said it was fair. This discussion of working relationships opened the way for questions on sexual harassment and preferential treatment.

A sexual offence is a serious matter in any workplace and when asked, 30% of the females interviewed said they had experienced it or knew of someone who had. When asked whether or not these incidents were reported all except one person said no and that they handled it themselves. The one individual who reported the incident said she was transferred. A majority of the males interviewed said that females are generally given preferential treatment by male supervisors. However, most of them also stated that females should not be treated any differently for the mere fact of being female, but that equal pay means equal work. Some persons even suggested that a lot of females deliberately seek to be treated in a special manner. One officer emphasized the point though that the performance appraisal is structured in such a manner that it does not speak to gender and every individual will be evaluated based on his or her performance. I am totally supportive of this view. Yes we are well aware

that we are the weaker of the sexes (physically) but we should not use this as an excuse not to perform our duties efficiently. That is why we must demonstrate our abilities to the fullest and put in the extra effort that it requires to reach our full potential so that when we are granted certain opportunities, it is based on our own merits.

Overall, when asked of the males whether women were seen as a valuable part of the Fire Brigade work force the response was an overwhelming "yes". Some of the reasons given were that women tend to be more dedicated and passionate about the job. As well, women have their own ideas and contribution to make and their different thought processes will help to form a more rounded organization.

On the matter of whether equal opportunities exist for both sexes, the majority of persons interviewed tend to believe that it does with some persons suggesting that it was biased to one or the other of the sexes. My opinion is that equal opportunities do exist as when vacancies are advertised for posts, in whichever department, or for local or overseas training, they do not mention gender and anyone can apply. A senior officer responded that when these vacancies are advertised, females rarely apply which may be attributed to the fact that there are only a few females with the required pre-requisites.

Males and females now receive the same quality of training. Females have been promoted to senior ranks, sent on both local and overseas courses and now drive the department's vehicles. Women have made great strides and with recent developments that have taken place within the Fire Brigade, I dare say we are headed in the right direction and the only way to go from here is up. I asked some of the female officers what their advice would be for those of us who intend to excel within the Brigade and I leave you with one particular response.

"Be knowledgeable about the job, be

professional, be open to continuous education and training, learn something everyday and from every incident, lead by example, be a good follower but most importantly never think you completely know the job."

Ms. Williams is currently assigned to Fire Prevention - St. Catherine and is pursuing a course in Management Studies at MIND. Editor.

The priceless gift

Valbert Lawrence

It came out in bits and pieces, reluctantly at first, not for lack of eloquence but because she did not want the rest of the world to know. The first few years of her life are a blur, primarily because almost thirty years ago her parents were killed tragically in a motor vehicle accident. With that incident she became separated from her five other siblings and as fate would have it she was adopted by the Rodneys. So that is how Sonia Elizabeth Georgina James became Betty-Ann Marie Rodney.

About three years ago Betty-Ann joined the Brigade and at about the same time she also began renewing ties with her biological siblings of whom she had no memories. The former cadet, Montego Bay High School student and Seventh Day Adventist now started to enjoy the career path she had chosen and found pleasure in reunion with her siblings.

Then in 2004 fate or destiny challenged her love and devotion. The sister she followed became ill and was diagnosed with renal failure. One kidney was gone and the other was failing fast. It seemed as if Betty-Ann's world was closing in around her just as she was beginning to enjoy it.

The doctors said that there was hope for recovery if her sister could find a donor. When Betty-Ann was informed of her sister's ill health, the thought of donating even a fingernail was the furthest from her mind. Meanwhile, the search for a donor lengthened and the condition of her sister got worse.

One night like a bolt of lightning,

it hit Betty-Ann that she was going to save her sister by donating one of her kidneys to her. After initial reservations, her adopted parents gave her their blessing but even with her mind made up, Betty-Ann still harboured doubts that she could go through such an experience.

The night before her final decision, she prayed about it and told God that if it was still on her mind when she woke up the next morning she would do it. The rest, as they say is history. It was the first thing on her mind, the decision was made, and so started the many tests, hours of counselling, and many trips between Montego Bay and Kingston.

Early in November 2004, Betty-Ann was put to sleep and when she awoke many hours later, the operation and transfer were successfully completed.

On top of this brave selfless act, Betty-Ann paid hundreds of thousands of dollars on behalf of her sister to complete the surgery. While many of us don't even contemplate the giving of temporal gifts, Betty-Ann, modest and reserved, does not see what she has done as anything extraordinary.

After two months off the job, Betty-Ann is back at work, fully recovered and showing no signs of discomfort from the experience. We wish you well Betty-Ann.

We here at Firebreak also wish Ms. Rodney well and look forward to an opportunity to meet you. Editor

Heatstroke

The class assignment in composition was to write about something unusual that happened during the past week. Little Irving got up to read his. Papa fell in the well last week – he began. Good heavens shrieked Mrs. Kroop, the teacher. Is he all right? He must be, said little Irving. He stopped yelling for help yesterday.

Thought for today

Gentleness is not lack of strength but a quality, which doesn't disturb, doesn't push, yet knows its own power.

Condolence

Firebreak extends sympathy to all members of staff who lost loved ones since the last time we published.

Canute King – mother
Troy and Gary Frazer - sister



Former members of the Training staff honored at a function in January. From left D/O. W. Murray, Supt. D. Lewis former commandant and Asst. Comm. L. Williams also a former commandant.

Send your announcements, articles, queries, comments, jokes and suggestions to:
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Or any Fire Prevention Officer

Dear Reader

This second issue of *Firebreak* for the year is being published at a time that earmarks sweeping changes in the Brigade. At the top of these, in our front page article, is the departure of former Commissioner Major H. G. Benson and the appointment of Mr. Frederick Whyte as acting

commissioner, a position that we anticipate will be ratified in due course.

Curiously, immediately on the heels of this appointment comes the offer of scholarships for senior and middle level officers to the Management Institute for National Development, the issue of individual job descriptions for all members and standard operational procedures that outlines Brigade policies on all issues to provide guidance to staff.

A number of committees have also been formed to assist in development of the Brigade to include the phased development of the training school. Indeed this inclusive approach to the management of the Brigade has significantly improved the morale of the members. Now if only we could have some clean buildings and reliable trucks and a timeline for promotional examinations please?

Also in this issue our feature article examines the role of women in this organization while our personality profile highlights the remarkable heroism of another of our female members who placed another before self. This article too is a must read.

Once again let me invite you to make your contributions to the continued publication of the newsletter which is available online on the Brigade's web site or as hardcopy issued to stations. If you join our mailing list the newsletter can be made available to you by e-mail.

This is our way of making our voices heard on the issues, the drama, and dreams that help to make our lives so interesting.

Editor