

NEWS > SPOKANE

Spokane's first black firefighter dealt with racist harassment for years on the force

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Lawrence Goncalves Sr., 68, poses for a photograph at Spokane Fire Station 1 on Thursday, May 17, 2018. He was Spokane's first black firefighter. When he was hired in 1972, he said he experienced all kinds of racial harassment, including hearing the n-word multiple times, and at one point, waking up to see his station crew mates wearing sheets over their heads dressed as the KKK. (Kathy Plonka / The Spokesman-Review)



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Lawrence Goncalves stood inside the large bay doors of the Spokane Fire Department's Station 1 and looked around. Somehow, even 30 years after his departure, things looked remarkably similar.

“Back there was the kitchen,” he said last week. And the bunk beds, just behind that wall. Those doors, where the engines would race through before turning onto Riverside Avenue, as big then as now.

Of course, some things had changed – the new fire engines and the bright red paint, the unfamiliar faces. And across the street, where a butcher’s shop once hung strips of beef in the window, a Banner Bank.

“We ate good back then,” Goncalves said with a smile.

The 68-year-old likes to reminisce, mostly about the food and the good company he ate it with. Sometimes about the people he saved – the vents he’d crawl through and ladders he’d climb up.

But then there are parts he wishes he could forget.

As Spokane’s first black firefighter, Goncalves said he experienced and endured many acts of racial harassment by his white crew mates.

From the day he started working in 1972 to an early retirement in 1988, he said he would often hear racial slurs, either directed at him or at black people walking down the street. There were nooses left in his locker, and even an instance where his co-workers dressed like Klansmen and stood near his bed.

“It was every day,” he said. There were even death threats made to his wife and children, he said.

It got so bad, he said, that he went to a newspaper reporter in 1977.

“He said, ‘It’s not newsworthy,’ ” he recalled. “I didn’t get any help. I was very disappointed.”

Four decades later, Goncalves decided it was time to try again – a decision spurred by a recent report out of the city’s Human Resources Department that describes bullying, harassment and hazing at Fire Station 2, near Gonzaga Prep.

When Goncalves heard the news stories and read the newspaper's coverage, the memories flooded in – like that time he was sleeping at Fire Station 7 in East Central.



Report finds harassment, bullying by 5 Spokane firefighters; accused push back on allegations

A 40-page report filed by the city's Human Resources Department last month details allegations of verbal and sexual harassment by former leaders of the Spokane Fire Department's Fire Station No. 2. Those accused are pushing back on the findings of the report, saying it ignored fact-checking measures and discounted statements of support from within the department. | [Read more »](#)

“I woke up and all the guys were standing around my bunk with sheets and pillowcases over their heads, like the Klu Klux Klan,” he said. “It was funny to them. Not to me.”

Goncalves was hired in May 1972 as part of a minority-trainee program financed through the federal Emergency Employment Act of 1971. According to a Spokane Daily Chronicle story written on May 23 of that year, the then-22-year-old was the first black employee in department history.

“Fire Chief Alfred L. O’Connor implemented the program in an attempt to achieve minority representation in the previously all-white department,” the story states.

O’Connor, appointed fire chief in 1970, died unexpectedly in 1981.

Goncalves mostly worked out of the now-closed “city hall station” in the old city hall, adjacent to River Park Square.

Back then, he said, it was a different time. Racial epithets were used regularly by co-workers, and they weren't afraid to say them in the presence of fire chiefs and other higher-ups.

Bill Jackman, a white 62-year-old retiree who worked alongside Goncalves for many years, remembers. "You'd sit down at a table at lunch time, and Larry would be cooking," he said. One of their older co-workers would sit down and ask if Jackman minded Larry cooking, referring to him only by the n-word. "And Larry was sitting right next to me," Jackman said. "He put up with more crap than you could shake a stick at."

And when it happened in front of his supervisors, Jackman said, they'd either shrug their shoulders or pretend not to hear it. One chief reportedly told Goncalves, "You're just going to have to get thick skin."

"He was called the n-word constantly," Jackman said. "He was denigrated, marginalized, every time. The man went through hell on the job. Just because of his skin color."

Jackman said the culture in those days was akin to the bullying and harassment firefighters reportedly experienced at Station 2. While every rookie got some of it, he said, the worst was leveled at minorities and women.

Ron Payton, who retired as an assistant chief in 1994 after 32 years with the department, was hesitant to ascribe racism or racial animosity to the treatment Goncalves received.

As a lieutenant of a station that Goncalves would sometimes work in, he claimed he never witnessed any acts of racism, but he didn't doubt they happened elsewhere. It wasn't tolerated in his station, he said, and the crew knew it.

"As with any organization, well, I can't say any, but most organizations, you're going to get some horseplay and things that people take wrong," he said.

Payton said if there was racism levied toward Goncalves or other minority members, it was likely due to frustration with the process that brought them in. He said when Goncalves and two other black firefighters were hired after him, many in the department felt as though they were getting “preferential treatment.”

“The guys did not mind that they were black,” he said. “They went way down on the list past a whole bunch of people and that caused a whole lot of feelings.”

Goncalves said he went to administrators with complaints, but each time they went unanswered. Eventually, he just kept it to himself.

The response was a byproduct, he said, of growing up in a mostly white city like Spokane.

“I learned to put a smile on my face and keep walking,” he said.

After retiring from the fire department in 1988 due to complications from a shoulder injury, things slowed down for him. But he kept up his push for racial equality.

In 1992, his daughter Satirhea Goncalves refused to play the song “Shortenin’ Bread” at her Mullan Road Elementary School concert after she learned how the traditional lyrics referred disrespectfully to black people; the tune’s origins stem from a pre-Civil War plantation song.

In a story written by Inland Northwest writer and novelist Jess Walter, then a Spokesman-Review reporter, the fifth-grader said she would plug her ears when the orchestra practiced the song. She begged her teachers not to play it. “The song makes me feel bad,” she said at the time. “It makes fun of people.”

Her father agreed. And unlike his experience in the fire department in the 1970s and 1980s, this time, he pushed back.

“They could’ve used another song or just dropped that one,” he told the reporter. “What they’re saying is that our children’s feelings aren’t important.”

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