

Hartford Fire Chief John Stewart Created Legacy Of Respect

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Editorial: Former #Hartford Fire Chief John B. Stewart Jr. leaves a remarkable legacy

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Ask Chief John B. Stewart Jr. why he became a firefighter and he would think back to that brutally hot day in the summer of 1944, when he was 14 years old. He was working at the Ringling Brothers, Barnum & Bailey Circus at the Barbour Street grounds.

Suddenly the big top erupted in flames and a desperate chaos ensued. Young Stewart helped some people to safety, but many died.

The young man never forgot the Hartford circus fire. Eight years later, Mr. Stewart joined the Hartford Fire Department. He stayed for 40 years, the last 12 as the department's first African American chief. After retiring in 1992, he served on the city council and many boards and commissions.

He died Sunday at 85, one of the best-known and best-liked Hartford citizens of his generation.

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It wasn't easy — to say the least — for a young African American in the white-dominated department. People told Mr. Stewart that he was lucky to get the job and that he would never become an officer. But he worked hard, won the respect of his colleagues and moved, literally and figuratively, up the ladder.

As chief he worked to connect the department with the community, acquired new equipment and increased the department's diversity. A tall and handsome man who looked the part of a fire chief, Mr. Stewart combined military bearing with a pleasant personality. As a city councilman he worked to bring economic development to the North End, and to create an African American cultural center in the neighborhood, a work that is still underway.

He was active up to this year, heading a special task force studying the fire department. His name will be joined with other pioneers — too many to mention — of the first generation of African Americans to break through into elective and appointive office in Hartford.

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