

FDNY Family Portraits:

DCI Calvin James

The FDNY has been around for nearly 154 years, but it is constantly evolving – and Deputy Chief Inspector Calvin James is proof.

He is among four chiefs (O'Dell Horton, Darryl Chalmers and Angel Cruz) who built the Department's Construction, Demolition and Abatement (CDA) unit from the ground up.

"We had to create everything from nothing," he said. "We had to figure out what we were looking for. It was a task, but we put it together."

After the tragic Deutsche Bank fire in 2007, the Department launched the new unit in the Bureau of Fire Protection to ensure construction sites in New York City remain safe. That includes more than 800 sites looking into construction site fires and worker accidents, not to mention permits and ensuring sprinkler-standpipe systems are operable.

Their 20-person staff, including four deputy chiefs and 16 inspectors, has been a part of jobs from the Barclay's Center to LaGuardia Airport, the Empire State Building to Hudson Yards.

One of Chief James's most memorable, he said, was 1 World Trade Center, where he had to take a hoist 80 stories up to inspect every floor, including the subbasement, a job that took multiple inspectors many



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months to complete.

"Yellow cabs were just an inch long from up there," he said.

There, they ensured everyone has proper permits, safety nets were installed, garbage is not piling up, there were no signs of smoking, standpipes and hoses are in working order, and "everything is where it's supposed to be." He said he has even needed to take people off the job for hazardous practices.

When the unit was first created, he said the team encountered issues with contractors who tried to skirt the requirements. CDA inspectors had to convince them they were

focused on safety, that violations needed to be taken seriously, and their unit was here to stay.

"We're constantly on top of contractors," he said.

This role seems like a far cry from where he began.

Chief James was born and raised in Trinidad, where he worked as a plumber before moving to New York in the middle of winter.

"I went from the sun to the cold," he said, laughing.

Here, he went to school for plumbing and got certified.

For work, he often would do sprinkler testing, and through that work he met several

inspectors who asked if he would be interested in working for the FDNY.

He started in 1999, briefly working in the District Office before moving to the Suppression Unit because of his background.

"It turned out to be the greatest job on the face of the earth," he said. "You learn a lot, it expands your mind, and you see things in a whole different way."

He said he is proud of his career and enjoys the work he does.

"It's nice to look forward to coming to work," he said. "Even when you're tired, you get that extra boost and the process starts all over again."