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Sofa Super Store Fire

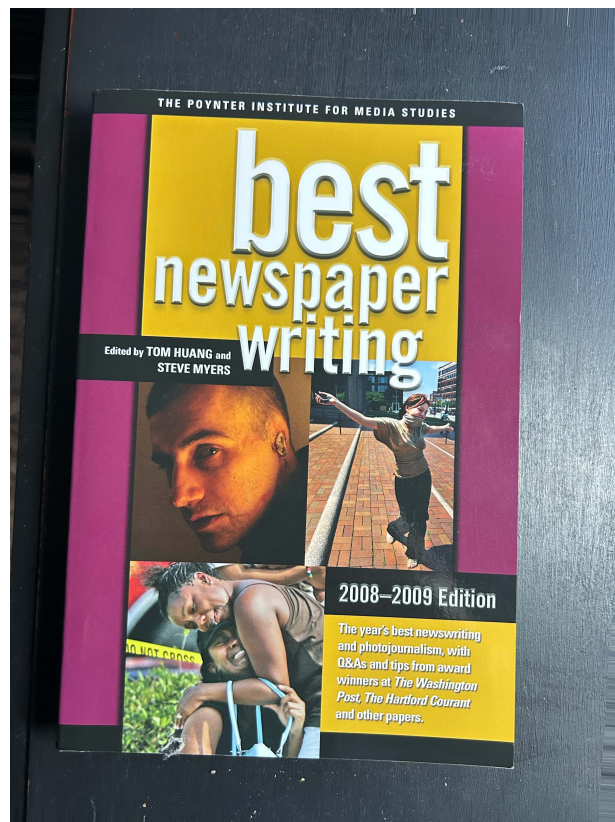
"James 'Earl' Allen Drayton"

By Ron Menchaca

The Post and Courier · Charleston, South Carolina · June 20, 2007

Winner: Team Deadline News Reporting

Best Newspaper Writing 2008–2009 · The Poynter Institute for Media Studies



Best Newspaper Writing, 2008–2009 Edition · Edited by Tom Huang and Steve Myers · The Poynter Institute for Media Studies

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James "Earl" Allen Drayton

JUNE 20, 2007

By Ron Menchaca

James "Earl" Allen Drayton, 56, was the oldest of the nine firefighters killed Monday.

A 32-year veteran of the Charleston Fire Department, he was known by generations of city firefighters. They called him "old school" around Station No. 19 in West Ashley.

He is survived by his wife Kimberly, five children, three stepchildren and several grandchildren.

Kimberly Drayton said she last saw her husband Monday morning as he left for work from their Sangaree home near Summerville. The couple had planned to leave for a cruise to Puerto Rico this weekend. "He was all packed," she said. "He was so excited."

Drayton exuded a quiet confidence. His rhythmic walk and talk earned him the nickname "Cool Earl," said his older brother, Herbert Drayton. "I never really heard him raise his voice."

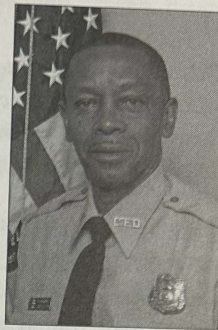
One of eight children, he was born on Charleston's West Side and his family moved to Amherst Street on the city's East Side when he was a child.

After graduating from C.A. Brown High School, he enlisted in the Marine Corps and served eight years on active duty. He had a reputation for dressing to the nines and meticulously washing his black Chrysler. He was selected several times to drive Mayor Joe Riley in the city's Christmas Parade.

He was on his third retirement with the department, his wife said. "They kept asking him back. He was going to give it two more years."

Drayton also worked as a stagehand. He painted scenes and built sets for countless local performances. He also wore the battle scars of a seasoned firefighter. He was knocked unconscious by an electrical shock while battling a blaze in 1999. His family says he was once trapped in another fire.

Chief Rusty Thomas worked alongside Drayton as the two were coming up through the ranks in the 1970s. Thomas recalled a call that got a rise out of the low-key Drayton. A hot-water heater had caught fire in a house downtown, and as they headed toward the fire, Drayton got excited and blurted, "Rusty, get this going. That's my house."



James "Earl" Allen Drayton