Denis Onieal, New Jersey City University, Class of '76

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If Denis Onieal ever missed an assignment when he was a student at New Jersey City University (NJCU), he never had to use the tried but true excuse of the 'dog at the homework.' He would have had better and truer excuses – perhaps saving the dog and his owner from a burning building. When Dr. Onieal, NJCU class of '76, attended NJCU, he was a fulltime firefighter for Jersey City.

His education, his upbringing, and his unwavering commitment to serving others as an emergency services professional, landed him in his current job – Deputy U.S. Fire Administrator for the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA). Named to this position in May 2015, he is responsible for managing USFA facilities, data, public education programs, and training activities at the National Emergency Training Center.

Following in the footsteps of his father, a Jersey City firefighter, he joined the Jersey City Fire Department in 1971 and rose through the ranks from firefighter to deputy chief, then acting chief in 1995, leading a uniformed force of 620 firefighters and officers. He spent his entire time "in the street" as a line fire officer.

Dr. Onieal was appointed superintendent of the National Fire Academy (NFA) in 1995. He completed a bachelor of science degree from New Jersey City University in 1976 (known as Jersey City State College back then), a master's degree in public administration from Fairleigh Dickinson University in 1978, and a doctor of education degree from New York University (NYU) in 1990. He taught in the master's and doctorate programs in education at NYU for five years and has written numerous articles in the fire field.

On the day he was interviewed for the NJASCU alumnus profile, he was in the midst of arranging transport of life-saving food and water and other supplies to Florida, in anticipation of a major hurricane making landfall. Reticent when talking about his own accomplishments, he became garrulous when talking about the role NJCU played in his career.

"NJCU's Fire Science Program had senior level, well-educated street practitioners from police and fire departments running the program. The faculty gave students the benefit of their intellect and real life experience dealing with all sorts of situations. They took us from the street to the classroom in an accessible and non-intimidating manner."

"I had two incredible mentors: Dr. Jim Kline – captain in the NYC Fire Department; and John Sullivan (JD, LLM) retired inspector of NYC Police Department … Their knowledge, the role models of how they succeeded in their lives and careers, and their ongoing encouragement were priceless," he said.

On a practical level, the NJCU program was invaluable because of the scheduling consideration for those in the program who were fulltime emergency service providers. The classes were scheduled to accommodate fire fighters and EMTs doing shift work, day or night, in many cases working rotating shifts.

Dr. Onieal had to draw on all of his resources – that of character and training – after 9/11. Dr. Onieal led USFA's team at the World Trade Center in 2001, working behind the scenes to help the New York City Fire Department re-establish systems of command, control and on-site communications. He was on site on September 12th for three weeks

And has had cancer, as have two of his colleagues who worked on the site with him. Of the more than 5,400 people who have been diagnosed with cancers linked to the 9/11 attacks who are registered with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's World Trade Center Health Program, almost 4,700 are first responders, emergency responders, recovery and cleanup workers, and volunteers who helped in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the crash site near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. (www.cnn.com/2016/08/15/health/September-11-cancer-diagnoses/)

Dr. Onieal keeps getting clean bills of health nowadays, a fact that makes his wife, two children and two grandchildren very happy, along with the millions whom he serves in his current job.

Even though he modestly refrains from touting his accomplishments, his colleagues have no such restraint. In March 2015, Dr. Onieal was awarded the James O. Page EMS Achievement Award from the International Association of Fire Chiefs' EMS Section. This award honors those who demonstrate professionalism, a drive for excellence, and exemplary performance and leadership. And in April 2015, the Congressional Fire Services Institute (CFSI) awarded Dr. Onieal the CFSI/Motorola Solutions Mason Lankford Fire Service Leadership Award. The award recognizes individuals who are proactive at the local, state and federal government levels to improve and advance fire/emergency services and life safety issues.

Dr. Onieal learned from his NJCU mentors that saving lives sometimes can be more than rescuing people physically from fire, floods and other disasters. He hopes when he "retires" to save lives in the same way his teachers saved him – by teaching.