

Austin's only female African American Austin firefighter retires

Betty Swint said the key to success was working hard.

By [Claire Osborn](#)

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Ray Hendricks remembers being impressed with Betty Swint when they both went through Austin's firefighter academy in 1979.

"She was pretty determined to prove she could do anything, and she did just that without bringing much attention to herself," said Hendricks, who's retired from the Fire Department. "She pulled her own weight."

Swint had been pulling her own weight since she was a little girl in rural Georgia, chopping cotton at age 8 for \$3 a day. And as the only African American woman to ever work for the Austin Fire Department, she kept pulling her weight through a 27-year career that ended March 23.

Swint, 55, doesn't talk about herself in terms of breaking barriers or being a symbol. She just wanted to do the job and show her co-workers — most of them male — that she could be trusted when they went into the flames together.

"As far as I can remember, I had a can-do attitude," she said, quietly smiling.

Female firefighters, she said, earn respect from their male co-workers "the minute they see they won't have to carry you."

Swint was one of seven children of a sharecropper father who died when she was a girl. She spent her childhood in Sandersville, Ga., raising peas and squash before and after school for her family to sell. They didn't get electricity until she was in the 10th grade, she said.

After graduating from high school, Swint earned a bachelor's degree in health and physical education from Fort Valley State College in Georgia. She followed that with a master's degree in physical education from Southern Illinois University.

Her mother had gone to school through 10th grade, Swint said, but all seven children graduated from high school, and two of them got master's degrees.

"In the South, there are two kinds of wealth: education and money," Swint said. "If you don't have money, you can get an education."

A job at the University of Texas in physical education brought her to Austin.

Two years later, while working as a runner for a title company, she noticed a fire station in Hyde Park where the firefighters always seemed to be having a good time playing badminton between calls, she said.

After hearing on the radio that Austin needed firefighters, she didn't hesitate to apply.

Her first day on the job was disappointing, she said. Her supervisor wouldn't even let her get off the truck at a fire.

"I think he was just trying to be protective," she said.

After that, she earned her way off the truck.

"I had to prove myself all over again there," she said. Two transfers later, when she went to Fire Station No. 26 on Wentworth Drive in Northeast Austin, Swint she said she discovered her calling: fighting grass fires.

She had been around plenty of them as a child watching one of her brothers set fire to the fields to prepare for planting. Sometimes the fires blew out of control, and they had to call the fire department, she said.

As a firefighter, she learned how to tame the fires, she said.

"There was nobody that worked harder on a grass fire than Betty," said Lt. Jan Wesson. "She would tackle it like a bulldozer."

Swint was promoted and became an engine driver at Station 26, where she stayed — except for a brief stint in the training department — until she retired. Now she plans to become a dog trainer and open a camping supply business.

Sometimes it was isolating being the only female African American firefighter in Austin, she said, but the excitement of the job kept her going.

"I fit in pretty good with the good old boys," she said.