

LOCAL

New Minneapolis Fourth Precinct inspector's story is one of the North Side

Charlie Adams is a product of the area he polices.

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Growing up, Charlie Adams would catch the bus to watch the annual Aquatennial Parade in downtown Minneapolis, where he and his friends used to get stopped and hassled by the police for nothing more than being young and Black.

So it came as something of a surprise, then, when he joined the department after college.

Fast-forward 35 years, and Adams is the recently appointed inspector of the North Side Fourth Precinct at a crucial moment for policing in the city following the death of George Floyd last May.

He steps into the job amid a polarizing debate about the role of law enforcement in American society, with some City Council members and activists arguing that a system with roots in the slave patrols of the Colonial era is inherently racist and therefore cannot be reformed.

Adams, 58, agrees the department has to take ownership of past injustices but says he has also seen the difference that good policing can make.

The bigger problem, he argues, rests with society at large.

"You've got systemic racism in everything," Adams said, using as an example the almost all-white mob attack on the U.S. Capitol that left five people dead earlier this month. "Everyone wants to talk about law enforcement — yes, you know it's there, but it's in our country."

Some North Siders say Adams' experience as a Black cop coming up in an often hostile department has prepared Adams to lead a police precinct where racial tensions are perpetually on a low boil.

Thick skin is a requirement for any inspector in the Fourth, some say.

"I don't see nobody running over him," said Lynne Crockett, a lifelong North Sider who organizes around issues such as education and public safety. "He comes from a whole different biography: He is us, so no one will be able to come up to him and say, 'Well, you don't understand where we're coming from.'"

In many ways, Adams' story is the story of the North Side.

Like the millions of Southern Blacks who moved north during the Great Migration of the mid-20th century, his family left their home in Arkansas in search of factory jobs and the promise of a more equitable future.

They eventually settled in the Sumner Field Homes — the "Old Bricks," as locals called it — one of the many federally funded housing projects that sprang up on the North Side and aggravated racial segregation. Adams grew up playing football with Jerome Benton, who famously played Morris Day's mirror-holding valet in the film "Purple Rain." His father worked as a mechanic, while his mother ran the salad bar at Dayton's for 30 years.

After high school, Adams played several years of football at a junior college and after graduating took a variety of odd jobs that included providing security at a department store and "driving the last No. 21 bus out of downtown St. Paul every night."

He said the job with Metro Transit was the best training for becoming a cop because it taught him how to deal with people of diverse backgrounds using nothing but his wits.



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As a kid, Charlie Adams spent time at The Way, a North Side community center, now the site of Minneapolis' Fourth Precinct station. Some

He applied to the MPD on a whim, telling himself that the best way to change a system was from within. He almost quit when he had a racist run-in with a white supervisor a few months into the police academy, but decided to stick it out after being reassigned to another Black officer, Gerald Moore, who took him under his wing.

Adams said he had many mentors over the years, both inside the department and out, including the late Ron Edwards (<https://www.startribune.com/longtime-minneapolis-civil-rights-activist-ron-edwards-dies-at-81/567175332/>), a titan of the local civil rights movement who advocated for diversifying the city's police and fire departments.

Taking a cue from Edwards, Adams became an outspoken advocate for diversifying the department, which then was even more overwhelmingly white and male than it is today.

He was one of five Black officers — a group that included the current chief Medaria Arradondo and was known as "The Mill City 5" — who [sued the department](https://www.startribune.com/high-ranking-black-cops-sue-minneapolis-police-department/12081986/) (<https://www.startribune.com/high-ranking-black-cops-sue-minneapolis-police-department/12081986/>) in 2007 over allegations that Blacks on the force were subjected to a hostile work environment and disparate treatment since the late 1980s. The officers settled with the city out of court for \$740,000.

Like others who look like him and wear the uniform, Adams says he has always walked a tightrope.

As a Black man, he said he was disturbed by the sight of Floyd's death under the knee of a since-fired city officer and other recent high-profile incidents across the city.

But he said that for all of its ills, he still sees policing as a noble calling. Police, he says, are often the only ones available to respond quickly to emergencies in high-crime neighborhoods that have been failed over and over again by governmental and societal institutions.

That puts him at odds with a new generation of activists who argue that failed efforts to change the culture within the department prove that it's beyond reform. Some, including several City Council members, have even called for its abolishment, in favor of a new system of public safety that will prioritize the safety of all residents.

Adams said that he intends to work closely with council members Jeremiah Ellison and Phillippe Cunningham, whose wards cover much of north Minneapolis and who have been among loudest critics of the MPD. But he said his top priority is to the residents in the precinct, who share with him their complaints about drug deals, drive-by shootings and speeding traffic.

"I really don't care what the other people say about defunding the policing or demolish the police unless it's people that live in this neighborhood, right?" he said. "They're the bosses, right?"

Ellison said that despite his past criticism of the department, he had a strong relationship with Adams' predecessors and said one of Adams' biggest challenges will be to begin undoing the harm done by decades of overaggressive policing.

"You're also inheriting a lot of bad will and so there's a lot of work that's needed there to build there," Ellison said.

Despite the area's reputation, he said he believes many North Siders having a begrudging respect for police, a perception reinforced by the fact that the area escaped much of the arson and destruction that engulfed parts of the South Side after Floyd's death.

He long ago moved from the North Side to a northern suburb, but Adams still spends many of his off-duty hours there. For the past several years, he has served as a defensive coordinator for the powerful North High football team, coached by his son, Charles. Still, he faces a tall challenge in taking over the Fourth Precinct, which has been a revolving door in recent years. Violent crime is a constant problem, and he will also have to motivate street cops who in the past felt abandoned by department leadership during controversies.

"Like I tell all my guys, I'm gonna support you, I'm gonna fight for you; you know if there's a mistake, then we need to know right away so that we can work on that," he said.

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