

CITY'S NEW TOP GUN - Val Demings takes over as Orlando's police chief Monday.
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Val Demings was giving a pep talk.

Standing before 182 kids during an impromptu appearance at Jones High School in west Orlando recently, the newly named Orlando police chief politely declined the offer of a microphone.

Instead, she paced across the cafeteria, making eye contact with members of the YMCA Black Achievers mentoring program.

"I would have never, ever have dreamed or imagined that this little girl from Jacksonville, Florida," would become police chief, she said in a booming voice. "But you know what I did? I believed in myself. And I dreamed."

Her message was brief, but clear: Don't let anyone say you're not good enough, bright enough or can't achieve your dreams.

She should know.

Born the youngest of seven kids to a poor family in a rural part of Jacksonville, Demings attended segregated schools in the 1960s, went to college and became a cop. On Monday, she becomes the first female chief in the Orlando Police Department's 132-year history.

"Val remembers the civil-rights days," said her older sister, Gwen Butler. ". . . If Dr. [Martin Luther] King looked down from heaven, he'd be very proud about what is going on in Orlando. She's chief -- a little black girl from the woods became chief."

Last month, Mayor Buddy Dyer named Demings, 50, to succeed Orlando police Chief Mike McCoy, who is leaving to replace her husband, Jerry, as Orange County's public-safety director. The law-enforcement musical chairs began when Jerry Demings, who served as the city's first black police chief from 1999 to 2002, announced his resignation to run for Orange County sheriff.

If he's elected in the fall, Val and Jerry Demings will run the two largest law-enforcement agencies in Central Florida.

Humble beginnings

Valdez Venita Butler was born in 1957 and raised in Mandarin, then a rural part of Duval County. Her father, James, now 85, was an orange-grove worker, landscaper and later, a retirement-village tram driver. Her mother, Elouise, now 90, was a housekeeper.

The Butlers lived in a three-room shack heated by a wooden stove. It had shutters and no windows, said Benny Woods, Demings' older stepbrother.

"Our first house looked like Jed Clampett's house" in the Beverly Hillbillies television show, Butler said.

A year after Val was born, the family moved into a newly built but unfinished shell of a two-bedroom home. It had no bathroom for the first several years, so they used an outhouse -- and a bucket for "emergencies."

"We had a garden and grew our own vegetables and raised our own chickens," Woods said.

Named Valdez for a friend of her mother who couldn't bear children, Demings was a clever and energetic child. Because there was little money for toys, the surrounding 5 acres became the kids' playground. The girls made houses out of mud. Val made a rag doll, and she and Gwen fashioned doll clothing out of old J.C. Penney catalog photos, Butler said.

The boys shot marbles and played stickball with an old broom handle and a rubber ball. When Val was older, she played sports with the boys and often beat them, according to her siblings.

"Val wasn't a tomboy, but she was an aggressive girl," Woods said. "She was a good athlete."

At DuPont Junior High School, she was secretary of the Charisma Club and a sprinter on the track team. Val liked to stare down competitors before each race.

"I have never been very tall in stature or very heavy, so you gotta use what you have to win the game," said Demings, who is 5 feet 4 inches tall and 130 pounds. "I think mental competition is just as important as the physical. And it starts long before the race begins."

At Jacksonville's Wolfson High School in the early 1970s, she sang in the chorus, was captain of the band's flag corps and was recognized as one of 22 outstanding seniors at graduation. As a senior, she won Miss Congeniality in the school's beauty pageant. Her talent: performing "The Robot," an imitation of an android moving to the popular '70s funk song, "Jungle Boogie."

"She [still] does it around the house," her husband chuckled.

Starting at age 14, she washed dishes at a nursing home and later worked at Dairy Queen and McDonald's after school. One day when she was off, the Dairy Queen was robbed at gunpoint.

Demings' mother told her to quit. Val refused.

Her siblings said her defiance of fear came from a grandmother, who always said: "Don't be afraid of anyone, no matter how big they are."

'In a class by herself'

Demings is taking over the 1,000-member Orlando Police Department at a critical juncture in its history.

Violence, robberies and slayings have been on the upswing during the past two years, especially in predominantly black neighborhoods on the city's west side. Last year, there were a record 49 murders. So far this year, there have been 38 slayings.

During the past 2 1/2 months, while a deputy police chief supervising the 300-member patrol division, Demings has overseen Operation Delta, a continuing drug-and-crime sweep aimed at reducing street violence in Parramore. More than 700 arrests have been made and slayings have slowed.

Though she has been with the department nearly 24 years, since being named chief last month Demings has gained a broader perspective of what lies ahead.

"I've been able to see the department through the ranks from the bottom up," she said. "Now, I've had an opportunity to see it from the top down."

Dyer said Demings' selection as the city's 36th police chief was based on her leadership skills and vast experience.

"Val was in a class by herself," Dyer said. "Val transcends race and gender."

And her familiarity and experience with Parramore, Mercy Drive and other west Orlando crime hot spots will help. For much of the past two decades, she has worked, lived, worshiped and performed community service there.

"Orlando has become a major metropolitan city," said the Rev. Charles Jackson of Hurst Chapel AME Church in Parramore and a member of the Mayor's SAFE Orlando Task Force. "Val was a street cop, a motorcycle cop. She's done it all and earned her wings."

A gregarious, fun-loving and deeply religious woman, Demings has volunteered on overseas humanitarian missions for the needy in Peru and Haiti; mentored young women through St. Mark AME Church in Washington Shores; and worked on various service projects through her Delta Sigma Theta sorority.

"All in all, she's just a down-to-earth individual, a good person who you want to have on your team," said longtime OPD Officer Renita Osselyn, a close friend. "She is a doer."

Demings says she is guided by the credo instilled by her mother:

"To whom much is given, much is required."

20 years of marriage

The seed for Demings to become a cop was planted in the late 1960s, when, as a sixth-grader, she attended an integrated school for the first time. She was selected for the "school patrol" to assist students crossing the street and was proud to wear her orange shoulder belt and badge on the bus ride home.

When fights broke out in the back of the bus, kids reported it to her.

"I would say, 'Knock it off' and 'Break it up,' and they'd stop fighting," Demings said. "Kids thought I had more authority than I did."

She rarely saw cops growing up, so her image of them was formed by television shows such as Hawaii Five-O, The Mod Squad and Columbo. "I would wait an hour for Steve McGarrett to say, 'Book 'em, Danno,'" she said.

After graduating from Florida State University with a criminology degree in 1979, she worked for 18 months as a state social worker in Jacksonville. Disillusioned with the bureaucracy, she applied to OPD in 1983. By 1984, she was patrolling Orlando's west side.

A year or two later, she encountered Detective Jerry Demings after working a juvenile go-kart-accident case. A miscommunication between their respective sergeants led her to think he was questioning her work, so she confronted him.

"I thought to myself, 'Who was this skinny girl talking to me?'" Jerry Demings said.

She vowed never to get involved with cops, but in 1988, ended up marrying the only one she ever dated. They have three children.

Val's workday begins at 4:30 a.m. with a four-mile run. She's in the office by 7 a.m. most days and still cooks nightly dinners. She and Jerry like to ride motorcycles on Saturdays to relax, and Sundays are for church, family gatherings and frequent visits to her aging parents in Jacksonville. "I need to look in their eyes and hug them," she said. "And I definitely need hugs from them."

Val and Jerry Demings are each other's closest friend and adviser, and after nearly 20 years of marriage, still are able to have blunt and honest talks.

Those may be more important than ever if Jerry is elected sheriff, which both say will not impact their relationship.

"We want each other to win," she said. "We want both agencies to win and be strong. We are on the same team."

Gets others involved

Demings officially becomes police chief Monday. She has made it clear she is up to the task.

After all, she has worked in almost every part of the department: as a patrol officer, detective, public-information officer, and investigations and internal-affairs-division supervisor.

Demings oversaw security at Orlando International Airport after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. She calmed the black community before a neo-Nazi march two years ago. And she defended police from accusations of racial profiling after the traffic stop of Orlando City Commissioner Daisy Lynum's son, Juan.

But more than anything, she understands that police alone cannot stop crime. Her goal is to enlist an army of volunteers -- from citizens, civic organizations, businesses and churches -- to help mentor kids, join neighborhood-watch groups and work with officers.

Demings' pastor, the Rev. Terence Gray, called her a "gifted" mentor who has appealed to fellow church and community members to invest more time volunteering. He recently signed up to serve as a police chaplain.

"The coercion to get more involved," he said, "came from Val."