

A happier ending: Take 2 isn't deja vu

By Chris Sykes
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Last week, Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr. and Firefighter Cleophas Bell appeared on television again, but this time it was under far better circumstances.

Prior to the March 22 press conference to announce the rehiring of Bell and 11 other firefighters, the last time CNN came to Orange, it was to document their layoffs. The segment that aired as a result of the interviews conducted with Bell and Hawkins showed how one small city was being forced to cope with the ongoing economic recession and the lack of public funds to continue providing essential services.

At the time, there seemed to be plenty of problems to discuss but very few solutions to be applied.

A few weeks later, the cameras were once again rolling in City Hall and Hawkins and Bell again were two of the featured subjects. This time, however, it was because the city had managed to reach a "historic" deal to bring the 12 rank-and-file members of the Orange Fire Department back to the force.

Last week's press conference was a turnaround from the original reason CNN came to Orange. That was good news to Bell and Hawkins.

"When the first TV appearance happened, it was a sad time for me. It was a somber experience because getting laid off was something that I thought would never happen," said Bell. "This time around was totally different because it was exciting to be back. It feels good to be back and to know that all of the hard work that everybody did to make this happen paid off."

Hawkins agreed that when

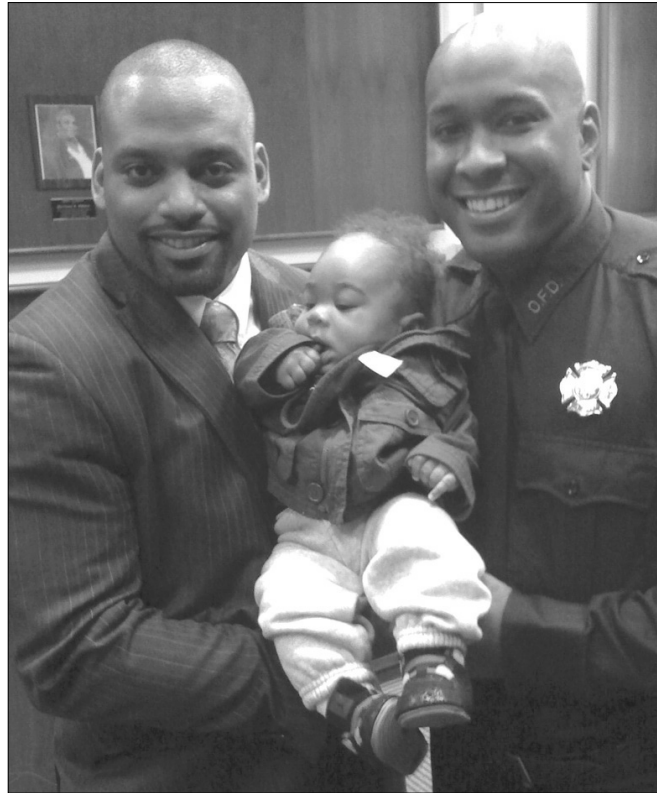


Photo By Chris Sykes

Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr. and Firefighter Cleophas Bell hold Bell's son, Connor, during a press conference to announce the rehiring of 12 city firefighters, including Bell.

CNN conducted the interviews for its first story, it was a sad time for the city because he was forced to make tough decisions in order to balance the city's books. He admitted laying off firefighters meant he was taking a risk when it came to public safety.

"I think we have to remember there are times during negotiations or conflict when both sides can be right and there still be an issue," Hawkins said. "The city, no doubt, has fiscal issues and constraints that there is no way to get around. Mr. Bell and the other firefighters have families they are

concerned about and want to take care of, and the union has a right to represent them and their interests. They are right to stand up for themselves, but the key is the ability to work together to reach a compromise and consensus that takes into account everyone's concerns."

When that happens, Hawkins said, it becomes possible to reach a deal like the one that allowed Bell and his 11 co-workers to get back on the job. He said teamwork is important to any process involving more than one individual, and when it comes to negoti-

ating contracts, compromise is important.

"They made some concessions because they lost some things in this deal, but they also took two steps forward because they just increased their fire force by about 50 percent. As a result, the taxpayers and citizens will be better protected in the future," Hawkins said. "Sometimes you have to be firm and it's business, but that doesn't mean that you can't remember the personal element to it. I compare it to two fighters who step into the ring and hammer it out and fight to the finish. Once it's over we can step out of the ring and still be friends afterward."

Hawkins said, it's time to enjoy the peace and that's what he and Bell said they are ready to do. They said it was nice to know CNN was at the press conference to document the happier conclusion.

"We called last Tuesday 'Rehire Day' in Orange because we were all happy to be back on the job," Bell said as he held his son, Connor, in his arms and shook hands with Hawkins. "I think that the first pieces that CNN did was excellent because we wanted to put a face on the whole situation with the Orange Fire Department. We wanted to let people know that we're real human beings with families and feelings and obligations and responsibilities, not just statistics.

"I think it was a great piece and the mayor and I both expressed the hard work that both sides were putting in to make Rehire Day possible," Bell continued. "It was a great piece so the people could see and understand exactly what was going in Orange at that time."