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## **Fire chief will test management skills** **Mike McDonnell**

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For newly appointed Omaha **Fire Chief Mike McDonnell**, fighting **fires** is a family tradition. His father, **William McDonnell**, rose to assistant **chief** of the department. **Mike McDonnell** has been following in his father's footsteps since he joined the force in 1989.

**William McDonnell** was at City Hall on Wednesday as Mayor **Mike Fahey** announced that he was appointing the younger **McDonnell** as the **new fire chief**.

In fact, it was **William McDonnell** who pinned the **chief's** badge to his son's dress uniform as the rest of his family looked on.

"I'm very proud of him," said **William McDonnell**. "He's a well-educated and dedicated guy. Anything he gets into, he goes full-bore."

Father and son have more than just firefighting in common: Both have been at the helm of the Omaha Firefighters Union during their careers. **Mike McDonnell** was president of the **fire** union from 1997 to 2007 and, in that role, led contract negotiations, advocated fiercely to keep four firefighters on city trucks and initiated lawsuits over firefighter treatment.

The management skills the younger **McDonnell** developed as a union leader will be put to the test in his **new** role as **fire chief**.

But **McDonnell**, 42, won't be starting entirely from scratch in his **new** position.

**McDonnell** was at the helm as the **Fire** Department responded to a series of powerful storms that recently struck the city, including a tornado that ripped through the Millard area last month. Millard

residents praised the effort of firefighters to help secure the area and help them move possessions out of destroyed homes.

Assistant **Fire Chief** Joe Gibilisco said Fahey made the right choice.

"There is no one else in the department who knows the budgeting process, how to run a **fire** department and how to get things done better than **Mike McDonnell**," Gibilisco said. "The rank and file support him."

Some Omaha **Fire** Department insiders believed it was a foregone conclusion that Fahey would appoint **McDonnell** as the permanent **chief**.

**McDonnell's** career has been on the fast track since he stepped down as union president in January 2007. In the 18 months since then, **McDonnell** has been promoted three times, which he has attributed to management experience and top scores on promotion tests.

**McDonnell's** quick ascent to the top ranks of the department has raised some eyebrows, however.

City Council President Dan Welch expressed concerns Wednesday that **McDonnell** doesn't have the experience needed to lead the department. Welch said he has been contacted by several firefighters who expressed similar sentiments.

Welch also is concerned that **McDonnell**: who negotiated union contracts that many people characterize as too generous to firefighters: is now in charge of the department's budget.

"I'm concerned because of his political history as the **fire** union president," Welch said. "He was the architect of the contract that put Omaha behind the financial eight ball and led to problems in the police and **fire** pension fund."

The current **fire** union president, Darren Bates, stopped short of praising **McDonnell's** appointment, saying that time will tell if it was the correct decision.

"**Mike** says he's going to continue to fight for firefighter safety as he did when he was union president, and that's the union's priority as well," Bates said Wednesday. "Over the next year, we'll see how contract negotiations and safety improvements go."

### **Mike McDonnell**

Age: 42

Positions held: 18 years with the Omaha **Fire** Department. Most recent positions: interim **chief** since December 2007; assistant **fire chief** since June 2007; battalion **chief** since January 2007

Education: Graduate of Omaha Gross High School, 1984; bachelor's degree in criminal justice, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1992; associate degree in **fire** technology, UNO, 1996

Family: Wife, Amy, and 6-year-old son, Ryan

Personal fact: Firefighting runs in **McDonnell's** family. His father, William, was an assistant **fire chief**.

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