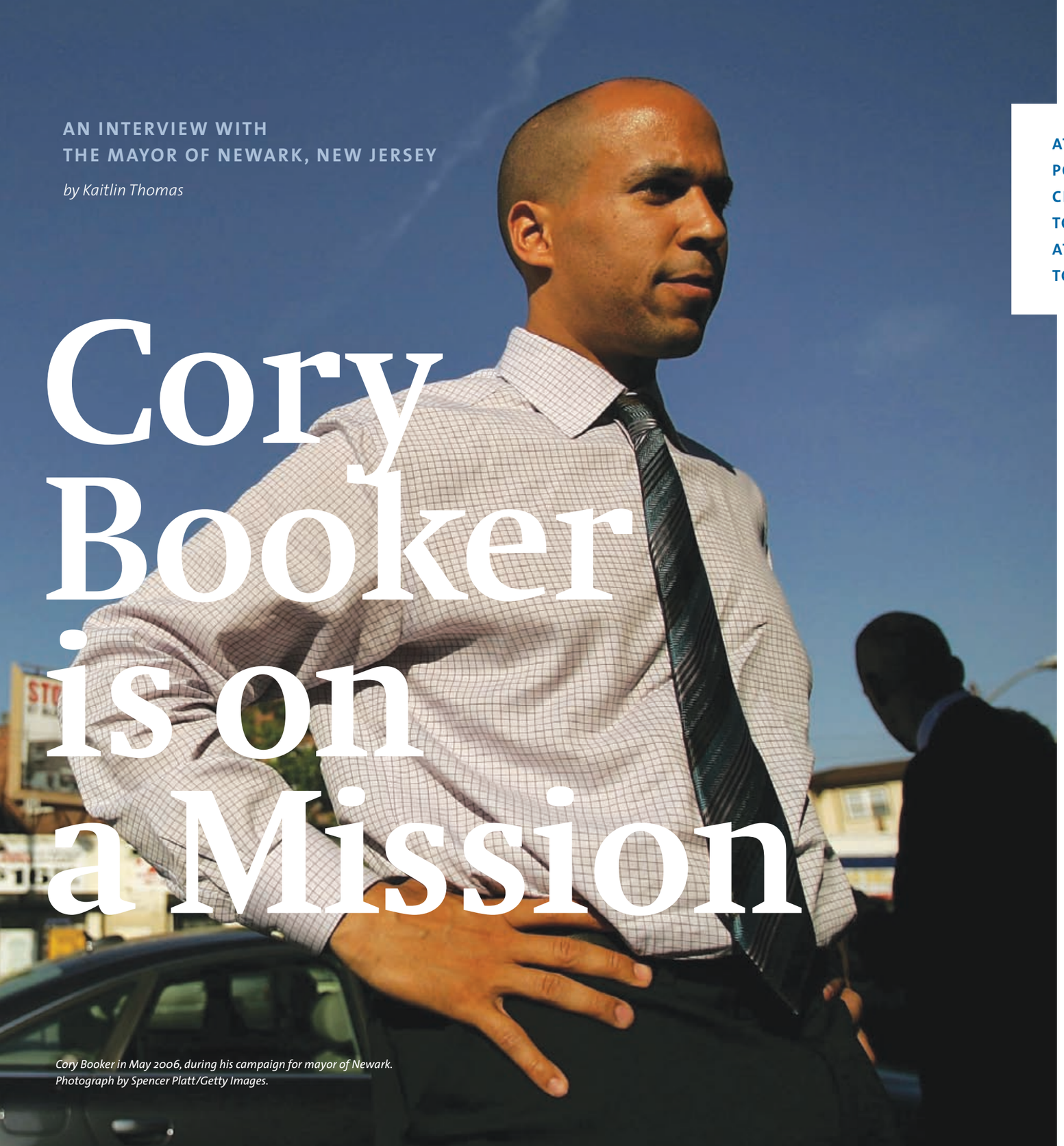
AN INTERVIEW WITH
THE MAYOR OF NEWARK, NEW JERSEY

by Kaitlin Thomas

Cory Booker is on a Mission



Cory Booker in May 2006, during his campaign for mayor of Newark. Photograph by Spencer Platt/Getty Images.

AT 39 YEARS OLD, CORY BOOKER '97 IS TWO YEARS DEEP IN HIS POSITION AS MAYOR OF WHAT IS CONSIDERED TO BE ONE OF THE TOUGHEST CITIES IN THE COUNTRY. IT'S A POSITION HE FOUGHT HARD (TWICE) TO GET TO AND THAT—DESPITE SLEEPLESS NIGHTS AND NATIONAL MEDIA ATTENTION THAT SOMETIMES SEEMS TO BE WAITING FOR DISASTER TO COME HIS WAY—HE CONSIDERS BOTH AN OBLIGATION AND AN HONOR.

Newark, New Jersey, has historically been plagued by a triumvirate of problems—violent crime (the city has a murder rate that is five times greater than that of New York City), poverty (nearly a quarter of the population lives below the poverty line), and poor education (in 2003, more than a third of Newarkers had less than a high school education).

As much of the outside world sees Newark as an example of all that can go wrong with urban America, Booker is motivated by what he sees as the possibility of making right.

Born to civil activist parents in Washington, D.C., in the late 1960s, Booker was raised in a northern New Jersey suburb. As an undergraduate at Stanford, he was a standout on the football team, headed a student-run crisis hotline, and did outreach work with youth from East Palo Alto. A Rhodes Scholarship took him to Queens College, Oxford, and a degree in modern history before arriving at Yale Law School in 1994. At the Law School, Booker was active in the Legal Services Organization, the Black Law Students Association, and the Big Brother program.

The world, quite simply, was open to Cory Booker. His choice? To return to New Jersey—to Newark—to fight the "savage inequalities" of urban life. What many might have predicted would be a short-lived, rosy-eyed tour in public service has turned out to be a life choice for Booker who, along his way to being elected mayor, has endured harassment from political rivals, assassination plots from local gangs, and life in one of Newark's worst housing projects.

Booker's leadership style is decidedly hands-on. Beginning with his first campaign, when he literally walked the streets, knocking on thousands of doors to introduce himself to the people of Newark, he has made outreach a key strategy. When a group of teenagers spray painted "Kill Booker" on the side of a school building, Booker decided to mentor them, becoming their "big brother" and taking them out for weekly meals and tutoring sessions. Mayor Booker holds monthly open-house meetings during which Newark residents are able to meet individually with him and voice their concerns about the City. And with violent crime one of his biggest concerns, he's made it a habit to spend time riding the streets with Newark police officers, sometimes spending whole nights getting a first-hand look at the violence behind the statistics that have plagued Newark.

Booker's work has not gone unnoticed. Beginning with the award-winning documentary *Street Fight* that chronicled his first mayoral run against longtime incumbent Sharpe James, the media has come to love Cory Booker. He's been the subject of stories by major media from *The New York Times* to *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. He has achieved almost super-hero status, being called "The Savior of Newark" by *TIME* Magazine, and named one of America's Best Leaders by *U.S. News & World Report*.

This spring, the *Law Report* had a chance to sit down with Mayor Booker and speak with him about his time at the Law School, his path to Newark, his hopes for the City, and what keeps him going.

YLR: When and why did you first become deeply involved in life in Newark?

CB: I had known Newark as a child growing up. It was a city I was very comfortable with through my parents and then I had some friends who were doing exciting things here, really interesting things in the city.

Then I went overseas to study and I came back to Yale...I think what happened during my first year of law school is that some of the experiences I had—eventually starting to run some clinics (there was a community economic development clinic I was involved in), some of the summer job opportunities that I had... definitely pushed me off the ledge and began to make me believe that I could be entrepreneurial in social change and start organizations that could fuel social change. So I got the courage and I thought to myself, 'What is my wildest dream for myself?' One of my heroes was this guy named Geoffrey Canada ... I was so impressed with what he was doing in Harlem—it now is Harlem Children's Zone—that I said, 'if I want to see social change, why don't I move into a neighborhood in the city I love, but in a tough neighborhood...and just start a nonprofit and see what we can do?'...

There were a number of fellowship programs out there that began to show me that I could jump and land on my feet, and then Yale had this tremendous program for forgiving loans [COAP] which gave me even more security. So I applied for a Skadden Fellowship with this vision. I got connected with another program which some Yale graduates were involved in—the Urban Justice Center—which was happy to allow me to franchise out, so to speak, their efforts into New Jersey... There is a beautiful statement about faith that says, 'When you come to the end of all the light you know and you are about to step into the darkness, faith is knowing that one of two things will happen. Either you'll find solid ground underneath you or God will send you people who will teach you how to fly.' I said, 'I'm going to move to Newark and I'm going to dive into a community and try to be a part of social change within a community.' Once I made that decision, more and more people seemed to appear...to guide me into making things work.

When you first ran for City Council, did you think that you'd eventually end up here as Mayor?

Well, the first revolution really was going from this great nonprofit leader—which was my vision for myself...my journal in 1996 was all spelled out about envisioning this organization, envisioning this nonprofit, what I was going to do in the City of Newark, and within one year I was running for City Council. So for me, it was a very big switch and it was a switch I had to make spiritually because, frankly, I didn't view politicians in all that great a light...

When I got into City Hall it was really the worst year of my professional career so far...when all the stuff started dawning on me about how deep the crisis was in terms of the urgency of the needs of our community—appreciating the incredible potential the city had, and with a great citizenry, but how the politics was just sort of a heavy yoke weighing down the City's potential. And there were so many things that were broken, perverted, corrupted within City Hall. Add to that a City Hall machine that was focused on stifling dissent or stifling reform, and I was sort of the tip of that spear and it was just grinding on me.

The first year I was getting migraine headaches all of the time, I was gaining weight, it was just an awful experience. And every time I thought I came up with some bright idea—like from budgeting, you know, 'This is how you budget, this is what other cities are doing, activity-based costing' those kind of innovations—nobody was listening to me; I couldn't get enough votes to do anything. It was very problematic. I think it was around that time that I started to form this idea that to really create the leverage to make a difference it would have to be done from the mayor's office.

Around that time you were also inspired to go on a hunger strike?

That was a pivotal turning point for me, personally. It was literally a year after I had been in office. I was having a really bad time. I was even having a bad time justifying being a City Council person because I wasn't feeling like I was making the kind of change that I was elected to make and even people who believed in me thought that by electing me a City Council person I could get things done—I felt like they were losing faith or getting frustrated as well.

It was around that time that a very violent incident happened in a housing complex in the northern part of the ward that I represented and this phenomenal woman named Elaine Sewell was calling me, frustrated, angry, upset about the violence that was going on in front of her complex...and I was responding to her that I couldn't do anything...I remember coming home that day...and running into [Ms. Jones] who was the tenant president of the projects I lived in...and I remember we had this almost comical exchange where she wouldn't let me walk past her. She stopped me and said, 'What's going on?' And I told her what was going on, very frustrated. And she said, 'You know, I know what you should do.' And after some back and forth...I said, 'Come on now, if you know what I should do, then tell me what to do.' And she said, 'You should do *something*.' And I'm like, 'That's it?' And she's like, 'Yeah, that's it.'

...I'm a very spiritual person, and I love studying faiths and the many manifestations of the divine—Judaism, Hinduism, you name it—and I was reading the Bible at that point. And there is a passage in the Bible that says if you have faith the size of a mustard seed you can move mountains... But it said sometimes you need to fast and pray. And I said, 'OK. I don't know what to do, but I'm going to go out there and at least make a statement.' And, yeah, I called a hunger strike, and it lasted ten days. And really I just sat as a witness to the world. And to the world responding. And so many people came together. And so much change happened... The one irony of it all is that the Mayor came out finally and promised to put a police presence out there to curtail the drug dealing and to build a park on the concrete where we were. And I think that was the moment I decided I really had to run for Mayor, because he never followed through and built a park. It's something we're building right now. We're actually building a daycare center and a park finally in front of those projects, which will make a big difference.

Can you tell me a little more about how the Law School might have prepared you for this position?

Well, the great thing about Yale as opposed to other law schools is that it really affords you the freedom to explore your own path. What's your passion? What are your interests? And then there are people there that help guide you and cultivate that interest. And that you can express that interest in very concrete ways, in academic ways. It's just such a great environment because it doesn't put you in a cage. And I don't mean to say other law schools are limiting. I think the discipline of other law schools is great, but what Yale does is that it creates an environment where if you are a focused, disciplined person—whatever your passion is—the environment, human rights, corporate law, constitutional law, you name it, whatever it is—if you have a passion, and you are a self-starter you can create an experience for yourself that is not only empowering but is also liberating.

It really was the only law school for me as I look back on my experiences now because it just provided for me the raw materials with which to make a career. And really great people—both my peers and the professors—who were there who did nothing but encourage, assist, help, charge me up almost.

Why didn't you run for Senate in 2002?

...I have very much a clarity of thought with my career right now, which is that if it's not resonant with my goals of being a

Photograph by Harold Shapiro

Public Interest Program Financial Support Expanded

Dean Harold Hongju Koh recently announced a series of changes to the School's support for public interest designed to meet the School's goals of creating and instilling a culture of public spiritedness that values lifelong public service, while ensuring that money does not become the decisive factor controlling career choices. The changes were a result of efforts on the part of a faculty/administration committee and a student-led working group.

The Law School is substantially increasing the amount of support provided through the Career Options Assistance Program (COAP), its pioneering loan forgiveness program. "COAP is and has long been the most flexible of any loan forgiveness program at any law school," said Dean Koh, "and we remain committed to maintaining its leadership position among our peer schools." The base income level below which participants do not have to make contributions to their law school loans was increased from $46,500 to $60,000. Those COAP participants making less than $60,000 will no longer be expected to make contributions toward their law school loans while their salary remains below that level; those earning above that level will be asked to contribute a portion of their income above that level toward repaying their law school loans, with COAP covering the rest. In addition, the amount of undergraduate student loans eligible to be forgiven through COAP was raised from $18,000 to $30,000.

The School is also doubling the number of post-graduate public interest fellowships from 14 to 28. Other enhancements include the planned addition of a full-time Director of Public Interest Programs to help counsel students, provide additional programming, and coordinate and support the many public interest activities in the School; and an increase in funding for international summer public interest opportunities.

For more information about changes in COAP, visit *www.law.yale.edu/financialaid*, or contact the Financial Aid Office at 203 432-1688.

Additional funding for the Public Interest Program will double the number of post-graduate public interest fellowships. Pictured here, a gathering of Arthur Liman Public Interest Fellows at the 2008 Liman Colloquium.

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part of the empowerment of and the strengthening of Newark, of being part of a movement to try to manifest the American dream here in this community, then I don't really want anything to do with it...I remember blunt conversations with people offering me secretary of state positions, county executive positions, secretary of commerce, secretary of labor, a lot of things that were put on the table, trying to pull me away—I felt—from what my purpose was.

...If you took a snapshot of me last year, gosh, when we were facing a massive budget deficit, the murder rate was being incredibly stubborn. As difficult as those days were, I always woke up feeling that I was in the right place at the right time, doing the right things. And there's a solace in that...we're making tremendous success, even beyond the imagination of some stubbornly—you can call them pragmatic, realistic, or cynical—people who said that certain things couldn't be accomplished. And I think that this is the most important fight in America right now, I really do—to make America real for everybody in our urban areas... These savage inequalities that still exist in our nation have to be addressed if we are ever to become real, a country that lives up to its creed, to its spirit, to its ideals.

Given all of that, I know you're facing issues with education, with poverty, with crime, with a variety of things. What's the...
I've got issues! [laughs]

What's the biggest factor that the fate of Newark rests on?
I think you can't untangle them. And everyone wants to do that. If it was easily identifiable, or if there was just one thing, then we could all do it. I mean, the challenge is that all of these things are interrelated, interconnected, interdependent, and you have to take the challenges on in a more holistic way.

So we identified key issue areas. We set a mission statement that we were going to set the national standard in urban transformation, in public safety, in the creating of economic opportunity, and in children and family issues...I pulled my staff together in January and I said, 'I'm about crime fighting. I know we have a lot of other things that we're doing, but this month I can't have a January 2008 be like a January 2007.' And I poured everything I had into the effort—staying out at night until four o'clock in the morning, riding the streets with police officers, going into police precincts, working one-on-one with our police director—and that began what's now occurring, which is probably one of the most exciting crime turnarounds in this country.

I've learned in my life that I have limited bandwidth, but that's the advantage of having a great team, and I have a tremendous team. You can start with my deputy mayor for economic development [Stefan Pryor], who is another Yale Law grad. I have great people in every area of City Hall who are helping us move forward...

How would you like Newark to remember you in the future?
...Being remembered is just not as important as getting it done and creating a legacy. I'm here because of so many thousands of people who sacrificed to get me here whose names I'll never know and the history books will never write about... I just want to be able to know—inside myself—that five years from now, ten years from now, we achieved the impossible, we expanded people's ideas... we banished cynicism, banished pessimism, and we changed people's conception of who they were, and what's possible within this country, within this city.

You said in an article that ran in *The New Yorker* recently that even though you're in this position where you're powerful, you feel more vulnerable than ever because your success is dependent on others' success.
...There's a Hebrew phrase *gam zu l'tovah*, which means in everything—no matter what—there's something good. So in this horrific trial [last] summer, where we had three college kids murdered, it's like I sort of saw the darkest parts of myself in a sense of just feeling, seeing the pain in my community, feeling the agony of these families, and having the national media descend and create this story that was reflecting everything that Newark wasn't—a violent place, a place where there's no safety and security. It was within that moment where I was starting to break inside, where I recognized the strength of so many people around me and I recognized that I'm not in this by myself... from August [2007] to August [2008] I think people are going to see this incredible story of a city that pulled together during that crisis and the following months.

Mayor Cory A. Booker plays a late-night game of Risk with Sean Bennett Laboo, left, and Anthony Jackson, center, in his office in Newark, N.J, as part of his participation in a Big Brother program. (Richard Perry/The New York Times)

Already you're seeing a record time without a murder in the City of Newark. We're now down about 70 percent on murders, about 40 to 50 percent on shootings in the city, so violent crime is from that point, really taking a dive down.

Is there anything else that you'd like to add?
I feel this profound sense of gratitude, frankly. I've had this life of remarkable blessings. I'm not saying that there haven't been trials or challenges. But I just feel this profound sense of gratitude. You look at an institution like Yale—all that goes into making it what it is—from the students to the staff, from people who through their generosity give to the institution—you know, I'm a beneficiary of those blessings. And I don't know all of their names—but that goes back to the idea that there's an interconnectedness. Somebody did something that afforded me this opportunity.

...I remember that powerful moment in my [Law School] graduation where my grandfather made the same corny jokes as he always made—you know, 'The tassel's worth the hassle, son' and all this kind of funny stuff—but at the same time, he said to me, 'Never forget that the degree you are holding is paid for by the blood, sweat, and tears of your ancestors, and that you have an obligation to go out in the world and stand up for who you are, stand up for all those who have stood for you.' It was just this powerful moment that drove home to me that holding that degree was the symbol of a collective sacrifice, collective struggle, and that my obligation as a recipient of that degree was to continue the struggle, continue the fight, to continue that profound purpose.

...The difference of the world that I stand in is the result of an unbelievable amount of love, frankly—wild, reckless, and strong, unyielding love—and there comes with that this tremendous sense of understanding that *you must continue*. To do anything less is to betray that legacy. **Y**