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Renaissance Man

Leading with a firm hand and an open heart, Newark Mayor Cory Booker proves his worth as a politician, spiritualist, athlete, poet and national hero. Is there anything this man can't do?

by Susan Bloom

Try to catch up with Newark Mayor Cory Booker on any given day and you'll find yourself struggling to keep a fast-paced schedule of executive meetings, press conferences, and ribbon cuttings interspersed with interviews and appearances on CNN and such high-profile news programs as *Meet the Press*. Since his 2006 inauguration, Booker has drawn local and national media attention for the major investment he's attracting, the jobs he's creating, and the sense of renewal and hope he's bringing to an inner city struggling to find its way and prosper. Along the way, the determined high-achiever has never shied away from a good fight, taking on crime in his city, making important strides for education, promoting environmental conservation and building bridges throughout global communities based on a sincere openness to all cultures and faiths. As a result, this Rhodes Scholar, Yale Law School graduate, and national hero who recently made headlines for rescuing his next-door neighbor from a building fire has been identified as not only a future contender for New Jersey's Governor's mansion but also as a likely presidential candidate who will continue to break political, economic and social barriers in the name of enhancing the vitality and welfare of all he touches.

Yet there's much more to Booker than meets the eye. Born in Washington, D.C., and raised in Harrington Park in Bergen County, the warm and approachable 43-year-old manages to achieve balance in the face of a demanding and relentless work schedule – from more light-hearted guest appearances on such popular TV shows as *Finding Your Roots* and *Restaurant Impossible* to the recent concert of favorite rocker Bruce Springsteen that he attended in New York City. In between a hectic schedule of press conferences and other scheduled appointments, Booker graciously took the time to tell *Natural Awakenings* a bit about his spirituality, creative pursuits, exercise regimen, approach to a healthy lifestyle and otherwise “lighter side”:

NA: *You always exude such a sense of optimism. To what do you attribute your high energy and positive outlook?*

Booker: Thank you for saying that. My parents raised me to feel a sense of gratitude about life. I grew up drinking from the wells of freedom and liberty and feel very blessed and grateful to be here.



NA: *You studied with famous rabbis while at Oxford and Yale. What led you to seek their spiritual guidance and what did you learn from them?*

Booker: A chance encounter with Rabbi Shmuley Boteach at Oxford led us to exchange books from each other's collections. His friendship has been a gift and has deepened my curiosity about other faiths as well.

NA: *In a job as busy and high-profile as yours, tell us about the importance you place on exercise. What is your fitness regimen and what are your favorite forms of exercise?*

Booker: As you can imagine, fitting in time for exercise isn't always easy. With a travel and appearance schedule as hectic as mine, where sometimes I'm up until 4 a.m. and sometimes I have to get up at 4 a.m. to go somewhere, I don't necessarily have a set routine. However, I feel much greater vitality when I do exercise; otherwise, I feel susceptible to a lack of energy and joy. As for my favorite activities, I love to jog, lift weights, ride my stationary bike and play basketball.

NA: *How do you keep stress at bay?*

Booker: I used to think that working late hours made me more productive, but then I realized it actually made me *less* productive. I think a key to reducing stress is by minding proper sleep, exercise and diet.

NA: *As popular as you are, all those in public office have to deal with constituents who don't like or who don't agree with them. How do you manage dissonance so that it doesn't derail you psychologically?*

Booker: I've always understood that whether it's criticism or compliments, you can't let either of those forces sway you. Being controlled by the ups or downs in life is not a good way to live. You have to be grounded in who you are, centered at your source, and elevated from within.

NA: *Tell us about your choice to be a vegetarian.*

Booker: A preponderance of the evidence made me want to experiment with this lifestyle choice. I tried it while I was in college and I found that my overall performance as an athlete [Booker played football for Stanford University] improved as a result, so I made it a permanent practice.

NA: *Tell us about your approach to the environment.*

Booker: Here in Newark, I've found that if we focus on greening our city, it accomplishes many goals, from saving money to creating jobs to helping the environment. As a result, we're

greening everything from housing developments to healthcare and more.

NA: *While you're an astute businessman, lawyer and leader, you've also been very supportive of the arts. What role do you see the arts playing in Newark?*

Booker: Newark is rapidly changing and we're currently experiencing our biggest surge of economic development in 50 years; major corporations are moving into this city and housing developments are going up everywhere. But while there are so many signs of civic progress in motion around us, I truly believe that you can't build a city unless it's fueled and inspired by the arts. I'm a chief witness to the marvels of this city and to helping to return Newark full circle to its founding, the very core of which is the arts. They give people hope and help us reach to higher heights.

NA: *What are the most important messages about healthy living that you wish to convey to kids today?*

Booker: Paraphrasing the words of poet Langston Hughes, it's easier to build great kids than fix broken men. If we encourage positive patterns early on, they'll be more easily sustained later on and can give kids the foundation on which to build a healthy and vibrant life.

NA: *Anything else you'd like to share about yourself that people might not know?*

Booker: (Laughs) I love poetry! Poetry is something that was part of the earliest days of my childhood; I remember loving Dr. Seuss books and others as a kid. I integrate a lot of phrases from great poems into speeches I give and I also try to write poetry regularly, at least one or two poems a week – it's very cathartic for me. I'll often tweet lines from them or put them on my Facebook page. Hopefully I'm getting better over time!

Freelancer Susan Bloom writes weekly health and food features for New Jersey's Asbury Park Press and specializes in topics related to nutrition, fitness and healthy lifestyles.

I Will Not Lie Down

an original poem by Cory Booker

I will not lie down
and I'll never say die
Fallen to the ground -
I still believe I can fly

Curse me and you just
make me strong
Say I can't
and I will prove you wrong

Set your traps and unleash your fire
I won't falter;
I'll find a way
to fly even higher

In the end you may think
I missed my goal...
But you will have it wrong;
this is the secret to my soul:

Success isn't about attaining
some prize, medal, or pin
It's not about what's outside,
but about being faithful
to what's in

Don't judge one by their difficulties
or how many times they fall
See instead did they have the courage
to stand when the world said crawl

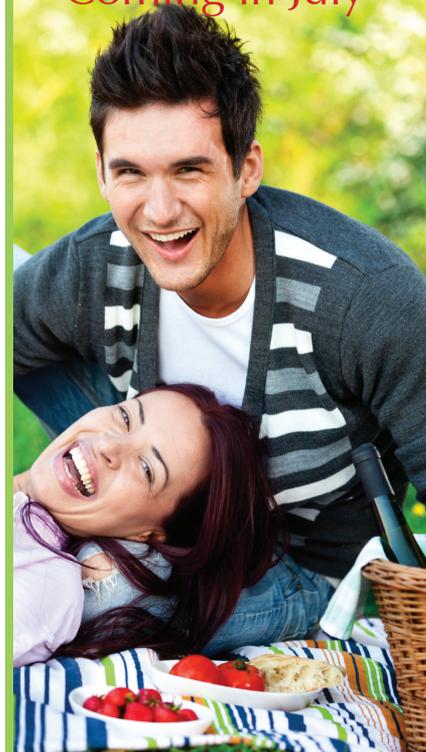
See if they held to hope
when others turned to despair
See if they gave love
when no one else seemed to care

See if they met every darkness
with their unflinching light
See if they stood their ground
when others surrendered the fight

Whether one lives long
or is called home in their youth
Our true obligation is every day
to courageously tell our truth

To play small, and deny the world
your true spirit
is perhaps the greatest sin
So today, right now, YOU BE YOU,
and you will always win.

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