

EVERY PERSON COUNTS

By Mayor Cory A. Booker

The Honorable Cory A. Booker is the mayor of Newark, New Jersey. Elected in May 2006 with a clear mandate for change, Mayor Booker has embarked on ambitious governmental reform with a focus on public safety, economic empowerment, and children and families.

In May 1998, I, then the youngest person ever elected to municipal office in Newark, was elected to the Newark Municipal Council as a reformer. I had enormous idealistic enthusiasm and enormous ideas—but found myself, time and again, unable to pull together the necessary votes to support my ideas. In fact, I was regularly outvoted 8 to 1. I felt incapable of delivering anything for my supporters and began to doubt my reasons for entering public service.

One day, about one year after I had been elected to the Council, I received a call from a tenant leader at a public housing complex in the Central Ward, which I represented. The security company for the complex was threatening to quit after a very violent incident with some drug dealers who had lit the security guard booths on fire. The tenant leader was desperately seeking my help as she sought to maintain safety for the residents. I tried to explain to the tenant leader that I was a legislator—that I didn't run city

departments and couldn't tell the police what to do. By the end of the conversation, we were both deeply frustrated at our seeming inability to come up with a solution. That evening, as I returned to the public housing complex in which I lived, I was stopped by our tenant president, who asked what was wrong. I told her the whole story and she told me she knew exactly what I should do. She looked at me and said, "You should do something." That was it, just "do something."

I left her feeling even more frustrated. As was typical, the elevators did not work, so I walked up 16 flights to my apartment. When I got there, I opened my Bible looking for a little inspiration. I found one of my favorite and often quoted passages in Matthew which says you can move mountains with faith the size of a mustard seed. It was the following passage, however, that really resonated with me—it says that sometimes you just have to fast and pray.

That led me to immediately call one of my aides. I asked him to purchase a tent. We took that tent and set it up in the high-rise projects where the violence had taken place. I told the drug dealers that I was not there to fight them but would not leave or eat any food until the problems were resolved. I know they thought I was insane.

The first night was long as my tent was pummeled with everything from food to feces and the music blared throughout the night. Word of what I was doing began to spread. The next morning, I was greeted by twelve large men—correctional officers from a nearby facility who took positions around my tent and announced, "We are not going to let you stay out here alone." The press also came to see what I was doing. I had them speak to local residents who were good people and told them, "This is the United States of America, the greatest country on the globe. We should not have people living in terror within their own neighborhoods."

People began arriving from all over Newark to stand with me and collectively demand change. There were ministers and college students who fasted with me, local hospitals conducted health screenings for children and elderly, and businesses set up job fairs.

The crowds grew by the day. At the end of the two weeks, there were hundreds of people from so many walks of life, from so many different faiths. There were imams, rabbis, priests, and ministers. They were black, white, and Latino. We all held hands in a circle, praying for peace, strength, and our community. They were speaking English, Spanish, Hebrew, and Arabic, yet were all speaking with one powerful voice.

I remembered the old African saying, "When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion," and Golda Meir's saying that Jews together are strong but Jews with other people are invincible. Both speak to the very idea of America: *E Pluribus Unum*—out of many comes one.

After two weeks, the drug dealers left and the tent came down, but the momentum in the area continued. The experience was transformative—it taught me that each of us has infinite power for progressive change, but if you want a different tomorrow, you must be willing to do things you did not do yesterday. What was extraordinary about the civil rights movement was that its leaders imagined new ways to accomplish their goals—no one had heard of Freedom Riders or sit-ins at lunch counters. Those were solutions of young people finding innovative approaches to a problem.

Social or political change does not simply occur by winning an election. But when people unify under a collective spirit with righteous aims, there is not a single unsolvable or intractable problem. It is all a test of the creative capacity of our community and of our persistence, determination, and willingness to sacrifice.

Volunteerism draws me closer to the Divine. ■

Taken from Cory Booker's *Moving Newark Forward* webs
"Every Person Counts" by Cory Booker. www.corybooker.com