

## **PRESS RELEASE**

February 7, 2013

### **ESSEX COUNTY FREEHOLDERS HONOR RODNEY MASON FOR COACHING NEWARK'S YOUNG PEOPLE TO EXCEL IN SPORTS AND AVOID THE NEGATIVE INFLUENCES OF THE STREETS**

(Newark, NJ) – During its Wednesday, February 6, 2013, meeting at the Hall of Records, the Essex County Board of Chosen Freeholders honored Newark resident Rodney Mason for his inspirational work coaching football and baseball to inner city youth, and teaching them to avoid the negative influences of the streets. The Board's commendation was sponsored and presented to Mr. Mason by At-Large Freeholders Rufus Johnson of Newark and Gerald Owens of South Orange.

Freeholder Johnson opened the program by saying that they were gathered for a very personal and touching presentation, and turning to Rodney Mason said, "Mr. Mason, I honor you, I respect you for the things you do and the way you're doing it. Here in the City of Newark," he continued, "if we had another 100 people like you, with your heart, hard work and determination, it would be a better place to be. I am proud to present this commendation to you, because not everyone wants to deal with the young men and women in our community, or to step up to the plate as they should. Our children need us, and they need us bad", said Johnson. "I know what you've done and I appreciate it, because if it weren't you, who would it be? So with great honor, I say thank you, thank you and thank you again."

Freeholder Owens added, "Rodney, I applaud you, and it is a pleasure for me to be a part of this presentation today. I grew up in Newark among drug dealers and all types of people, and to see you turn your life around, to get away from all that and start doing positive things is remarkable. I praise you and hope you continue to do the same thing."



**Freeholders Rufus Johnson (standing, left) and Gerald Owens (standing, right) presented the Board's Commendation to Rodney Mason during the Freeholder Board's Wednesday, February 6, 2013, meeting at the Hall of Records. PHOTO BY GLEN FRIESON**

Rodney Mason, a lifelong resident of Newark's South Ward, is mentoring and inspiring countless inner-city young people in the City of Newark as their volunteer football and baseball coach, and through the transformational example of his life story. Affectionately known as "Coach Rock", he stands tall, even from his wheelchair, in the eyes of young and old alike as he teaches them not only sports skills, but more importantly, where involvement in drugs and crime can lead you, as well as how lives can be turned around through sports, education and the active involvement of adults offering a positive message.

As a young man, Mr. Mason was a promising athlete in both football and baseball. A pitcher on the Malcolm X Shabazz H.S. baseball team, he threw a fastball that was clocked at 93 mph, and harbored dreams of becoming a Major League baseball player. But he was also no stranger to the pull of the street, selling drugs when he was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Even while attending Essex County College, he lived the life of a drug dealer which led to his incarceration at the age of 25 and, in 1995, to his being shot in the back in a drive-by shooting that paralyzed him from the waist down, leaving him wheelchair-bound.

In 2005, Rodney began to turn his life around when he joined old high school friends whose business, Cobblestone Records, initiated the Ceasefire All-Stars, a group of artists and individuals who promoted an anti-gun violence campaign in the community through positive music, videos and public service announcements. His love of sports would become his lifeline to a positive outlook on life, as well as the means by which he would help kids in his neighborhood escape the dangers of the streets. In 2008, Rodney started a youth baseball team, the Newark Eagles, with the Jackie Robinson Little League in Weequahic Park, a story that was featured on *ABC World News Tonight*, *NJ.com*, in *The Star-Ledger*, and is the subject of a soon-to-be-released book, *A Chance to Win*, by Jonathan Schuppe.

Mr. Mason went on to develop the Rodney Mason Mentor Baseball Camp, began coaching 5-7 year olds in football with the Pop Warner Bears program, and is now a Board Member of the Newark-based non-profit organization Respect Challenges, Inc., which provides educational support to underserved youth and their families. Rodney has also become a motivational speaker and mentor and a living example of overcoming adversity, of turning a life around and of becoming a beacon of hope for inner-city youth, ex-cons, and anyone with a disability.

Mason accepted the Board's commendation by first thanking his family, friends and supporters. He then added, "My main purpose is to save kids' lives in the City of Newark. I grew up here and I know what they're going through. So if I can support them and help them, it's a blessing. I'm just trying to save lives."

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