

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 24, 2011

**ESSEX COUNTY FREEHOLDERS “RECOGNIZE EXCELLENCE”
DURING THEIR CELEBRATION
OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY MONTH**

**Freeholders Pay Tribute to NJ Assembly Speaker Sheila Y. Oliver, Christine Carter-Davis,
James E. Harris, Charles Johnson and Celia M. King**



Essex County Freeholders honor outstanding members of the Essex County African-American community during their African-American History Month Celebration at the Hall of Records in Newark. Pictured in the front row are (from left to right): Freeholder D. Bilal Beasley, Christine Carter-Davis, Celia M. King, James E. Harris and Freeholder President Blonnie R. Watson. 2nd row (from left to right): Charles Johnson and Freeholder Carol Y. Clark. 3rd row: Freeholder Rufus I. Johnson. (Photo by Glen Frieson)

(Newark, NJ) – The Essex County Board of Chosen Freeholders held its Annual African-American History Month Celebration on Wednesday, February 23rd, in the Lobby at the Hall of Records. The theme of the event was “Recognizing Excellence”, and in that context this year’s outstanding honorees were: the Honorable Sheila Y. Oliver, Speaker of the NJ General Assembly, Christine Carter-Davis, James E. Harris, Charles Johnson and Celia M. King.

The sponsors of this year’s event were Freeholder President Blonnie R. Watson of Newark, Freeholder D. Bilal Beasley of Irvington, Freeholder Carol Y. Clark of East Orange, Freeholder Donald M. Payne, Jr., of Newark and Freeholder Rufus I. Johnson of Newark.

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The Honorable Sheila Y. Oliver of East Orange, New Jersey, was sworn-in as Speaker of the 214th New Jersey General Assembly on January 12, 2010, which distinguished her as the first African-American woman to lead a legislative house in the history of the State of New Jersey, and just the second African-American woman in the nation to lead a legislative house. Speaker Oliver is currently serving her fourth term in the Assembly where she represents the 34th Legislative District, and where she previously served as Deputy Speaker Pro Tempore, chaired the Human Services Committee, served as Assistant Majority Leader, and is a member of the Higher Education and Labor committees. In the Assembly, she co-sponsored the law that created the Department of Children and Families, and sponsored legislation requiring the Department of Human Services to report physical assaults and deaths at state psychiatric hospitals on its website, and report deaths to the Public Advocate. She also sponsored legislation that created paid family leave, amended the state's wrongful death law, provided specialized social services and medical treatment for inmates with mental health issues, and provided low-cost auto insurance for low-income residents. Prior to her election to the Assembly, she served as an Essex County Freeholder from 1996-1999, as President of the East Orange Board of Education, and as Director of both the Essex County Department of Citizen Services and Department of Economic Development, Training & Employment. Ms. Oliver currently serves as Assistant Essex County Administrator.



Essex County Freeholder President Blonnie R. Watson (right) presents Assemblywoman Sheila Y. Oliver, Speaker of the NJ General Assembly, with a commendation and plaque from the Board. (Photo by Glen Frieson)

During her remarks, Speaker Oliver told the audience that she was humbled to be honored by the Board because she was "...just a simple, little girl from Newark, New Jersey, who took advantage of opportunities made possible by those who came before (her)." Continuing in that vein, she said, "I am very proud that I know who I am, that I know where I came from, and that I have the opportunity as

Speaker to speak for the people who don't have the opportunity to speak for themselves.” She went on to say she will continue to tell their stories, tell their histories, and to talk about their struggles, “...because these are the things I focus upon as a legislator.”

Christine Carter-Davis of East Orange, New Jersey, is a highly respected motivational speaker and the founder and CEO of the Against All Odds Foundation, a not-for-profit multi-service agency dedicated to serving at-risk children and families throughout New Jersey. Despite being neglected, abused, homeless and orphaned at the age of 7, she overcame enormous obstacles to become the first person in her family to graduate from college, to earn a Master of Business Administration degree and to currently pursue a second Master's degree in Public Administration. Ms. Carter-Davis founded the Against All Odds Foundation at the age of 24, which has grown to claim unrestricted revenues of over \$1 million, and to employ 10 people full-time, and over 150 part-time. As a highly successful speaker, she candidly shares her journey with others, captivating and inspiring very diverse audiences, and also volunteers her time with numerous community organizations. Ms. Carter-Davis is married to Gary Davis, and they are the proud parents of two children.



Honoree Christine Carter-Davis (left), CEO of the Against All Odds Foundation, receives her commendation from Freeholder Carol Y. Clark of East Orange. (Photo by Glen Frieson)

Ms. Carter-Davis explained how deeply moved she was to be honored by the Board, and to be included in the company of the other distinguished honorees stating, “We stand as soldiers in service, forever connected by the fabric that brings us together here today, and that is ‘hope’”. She spoke movingly about the travails of her childhood, and proudly about the work of her foundation, Against All Odds: “We’re fulfilling our mission to ensure that one child’s success becomes the norm, not the exception. We obliterate boundaries every day. We erase limitations. This is my passion. This is my purpose.”

James E. Harris of Montclair, New Jersey, is the Associate Dean of Students and University Ombudsman at Montclair State University, and the President of the State Conferences of NAACP Branches, having served as the immediate past President of the Montclair Branch. He is the third of nine children born to parents who were sharecroppers until the 1960's, when they moved to Perth Amboy and then Newark, New Jersey. Mr. Harris earned his B.A. degree with a Secondary School Certification from Montclair State, and then earned two M.A. degrees in Personnel Service and Public Administration. He has testified before the NJ State Legislature, has appeared on television and radio, and is a frequent speaker at workshops and conferences, always advocating on behalf of the advancement and success of African-Americans, and to improve the quality of life for everyone in general. In recognition of his outstanding advocacy, he has been the recipient of numerous awards from a wide variety of organizations. Mr. Harris is married to his wife, Justine, and they are the proud parents of two daughters, both college graduates.



Freeholder Carol Y. Clark presents the Board's commendation to James E. Harris of Montclair, President of the NJ State Conferences of NAACP Branches. (Photo by Glen Frieson)

Freeholder Carol Clark introduced her honoree by saying, "James Harris is going to fight the good fight, he is going to speak the truth to power, and he is going to dare to challenge the status quo and authority, especially if he believes he is right and that he can do something to advance African-American people in this society." During his remarks, Mr. Harris spoke about the need to bring equality to urban public schools, to eliminate the scourge of guns, drugs and gangs that have "...ravaged our community..", and of the need to create jobs so African-American young men can go to work. In closing, he reminded the audience that the mission of the NAACP is to eliminate racial discrimination and racial hate and issued the challenge, "If you think racial discrimination and racial hate have been eliminated, just call the Tea Party!"

Charles Johnson of Newark, New Jersey, is a former educator and long-time mentor of young people. He was born and raised in North Carolina, and earned a B.S. in Biology from Morgan State University where he was President of his class and excelled in academics and athletics. He continued his education at the NYU Graduate School of Education, was the first African-American to integrate the Headquarter Company 50th Armored Division of the NJ National Guard, and joined the faculty at Allen University in South Carolina, where he taught science and coached athletic teams. Mr. Johnson later joined the Newark Public Schools where he taught science and mathematics at Cleveland and West Kinney junior high schools, and where he also served as a guidance counselor, recreation director and assistant principal, founded SOS, an alternative education program for disruptive children, and participated in the Afterschool program for more than 25 years. He also shared his love for golf by teaching youngsters for more than 20 years at Weequahic Park Golf Course. Mr. Johnson was married to his late wife, Evelyn, for 59 years, and they are the proud parents of two grown daughters, Sharon and Maria.



Freeholder D. Bilal Beasley (left) and honoree Charles Johnson share a moment following the ceremony at the Hall of Records. (Photo by Glen Frieson)

In accepting his awards from his sponsor, Freeholder D. Bilal Beasley, Mr. Johnson said he’s lived his life by a poem, and that he’s taught the young people he’s mentored to live by that same poem, “Invictus”, by 19th Century English poet William Ernest Henley, which he then poignantly recited:

“Out of the night that covers me, black as the pit from pole to pole, I think whatever gods may be for my unconquerable soul. In the fell clutch of circumstance, I have not winced nor cried aloud. Under the bludgeonings of chance my head is bloody, but unbowed. Beyond this place of wrath and tears looms but the horror of the shade, and yet the menace of the years finds, and shall find, me unafraid.”

Celia M. King of Maplewood, New Jersey, currently serves as Executive Director of Leadership Newark, Inc., a non-profit organization committed to the City through its public policy leadership development program. Previously, she was an experienced healthcare administrator who managed health centers for urban and underserved communities such as Harlem, New York City, Jersey City and Paterson. A former member of the Maplewood Township Committee, Ms. King also served as Vice Mayor, Co-Chair of the Finance Committee, and as President of the Board of Health, where she worked closely with the local drug alliance to campaign against drug use. She also established a Domestic Violence Crisis Intervention Program, hosts a cable television show, “Community Health Watch”, and acted as liaison for the senior citizen community. Ms. King is a graduate of Syracuse University and earned her Master’s degree from Milano, The New School University for Management and Urban Policy in New York City. She is married to Leonard Robbins, and they are the proud parents of their daughter, Olivia.



Celia M. King, Executive Director of Leadership Newark, accepts her commendation from Freeholder Rufus I. Johnson of Newark. (Photo by Glen Frieson)

Ms. King thanked her sponsor, Freeholder Rufus Johnson, and the entire Board for the honor, and marveled aloud, in the context of her work with Leadership Newark, about how wonderful it is to be recognized for doing something she’s volunteered and loved to do for so many years. She said, “It warms my heart to accept this award, but please remember that during this time, during African-American History Month, that becoming part of history is important, and we *all* are part of history. And although we are not all *famous*, we can certainly make our marks as long as we give a little of ourselves.”

At the conclusion of the program, guests were invited to a Reception on the 5th Floor of the Hall of Records. Entertainment was provided by the UBC Singers, all members of the music ministry at Union

Baptist Church in Montclair, New Jersey: Mark Beckett, Kathy R. Brown, Christine McCune, Brandon McCune and Joyce Shears.



The UBC Singers (from left to right): Joyce Shears, Mark Beckett, Kathy Brown, Christine McCune and Brandon McCune. (Photo by Glen Frieson)

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