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Booker gets hefty praise with Phat Friend Award

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Since taking office in July, Newark Mayor Cory Booker has been showered with a number of awards and platitudes across the region.

Yesterday, the new mayor said he got his best kudos yet: the Phat Friend Award.

The annual award, sponsored by the New Jersey All Stars, is given out to adults who are considered heroes, mentors or leaders who have gone above and beyond for the community's children. Booker was one of 13 recipients selected by a panel of Newark youngsters.

"Thank you for calling me phat," Booker said in a ceremony at city hall. "It is truly the greatest honor I've received, not just since I've been in office, but in all my years in public office."

Winning the Phat Friend Award is no joke.

This is the fifth year that New Jersey All Stars, a nonprofit group that offers community activities for children, has given out the prize.

The selection process takes roughly nine months, said Gloria Strickland, the founder of the Newark chapter of the All Stars.

Nomination forms are passed out for months at talent shows and other events sponsored by the All Stars. Around June, a committee of

10 youngsters sifts through the nominations and narrows the field of candidates.

This year, Strickland said there were about 200 nominations for teachers, police officers, politicians, a bodega owner and even a neighborhood barber who was admired for dispensing sound advice. After wading through the nominations, the committee invited the 13 winners in for interviews.

Strickland said it is rare for candidates to get booted out after the interview process, but it does happen on occasion.

"We try to make everyone a Phat Friend, but there have been a couple of eliminations," she said.

Booker, she said, won because of his involvement with children during the Safe Summer initiative. "(Booker) definitely deserves it," said Stephanie Gidigbi, 21, who helped select the Phat Friend winners. "He's come out to a lot of our talent shows and he's really into our community."

Central Ward Councilwoman Dana Rone also won, Strickland said, because of her strong ties to the community and dedication to the impoverished.

Once someone wins the Phat Friend award, they enjoy the distinction for the rest of their lives. There are no requirements with the title, except to be continually in-

involved with children and young adults.

There is also no quid pro quo involved, said Gabrielle L. Kurlander, president of the All Stars Project. Although Kurlander did point out that New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a supporter, did help the All Stars secure some funding. Bloomberg has yet to be named a Phat Friend.

The other winners include: **Alicia Williams**, college advisor at Essex County Community College; **Lyndon Brown**, parent advisory council for Newark Public Schools; **Darnell Chase**, Newark Pop Warner football coach; **Maria Morris**, executive vice president at MetLife; **Andrea C. McElroy**, vice president of Irvington City Council; **Brendan Dowd**, NYSE floor broker; **Cynthia Portera**, vice president of Essex County Vocational Technical High School; **Edward Wilson**, co-founder of Gifted Young Minds; **Julian Hines**, Office of Instructional Technology in Newark Public Schools; **Howard Weshnak**, teacher at Essex County Vocational Technical High School; and **Barry Morris**, CPA in Westfield.

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