

## Newark Now Holds Inaugural Commencement for Fathers



By Walter Elliott

**NEWARK:** The inaugural graduation ceremony of the Fathers Now Newark Comprehensive Center for Fathers may well have been one of the more unusual commencement exercises held here in Essex County College's Smith Hall Feb. 28.

An estimated lecture hall audience of some 230 enthusiastically hailed the 38 men in gray gowns and mortarboard caps who marched to the first two rows of seats to the strains of Sir Edward Elgar's "Pomp and Circumstance."

The 38 listened and occasionally rose from their seats over the next two hours to applaud and cheer Fathers Now Director LaVar Young, keynote speaker Councilman and Essex County Freeholder Donald Payne, Jr., and five other speakers addressed them and their relatives. The group was particularly animated when four of their class - Kevin Robinson, Rudolph Lipsey, Alfred Elliott and Kevin Hobby - spoke after taking their awards.

The applause, cheers and picture taking from among the gallery members reached a crescendo when Fathers Now Lead Instructor Abdul Muhammad started presenting the 38's diplomas. Young and Robinson said that they still could hear the ringing and the responses four days later.

"We've been getting calls all

day from people who want to sign up," said Robinson from an ECC classroom March 3. "We've completed a fifth class and a sixth one is to start soon."

"The calls from relatives and those who want to sign up has been constant," added Young from Newark Now's 89 Smith St. headquarters. "What we wanted to do was salute the first four classes by combining them for their first graduation."

The combined inaugural class, going by the program, is of 68 men.

Both Young and Robinson said that the Fathers Now program is a six-week course for fathers in transition. These men - younger and older - may be coming away from a job or home loss, or have been released from incarceration or want to take on more responsibilities for their children.

The classes, held at ECC and 89 James St., offers improving parenting, mathematics, reading and other life skills. There is also legal assistance, employment searching, mentoring, interview preparation, individual counseling and support groups available.

"It's been a pleasurable experience," said Intake Assessment and Case manager John Leslie before the graduation, "to see how far these men have come."

"I understand that 44 of you have been employed, seven are going out for their GED and

another four are continuing their education," said guest speaker Kofi Asante, Executive Director of the National Comprehensive Center for Fathers, of Philadelphia. "That's great - but I want to keep excelling; further your education, have a good job, start your own business. I want you to come back and inspire the brothers who are coming up in future classes."

The Fathers Now program models itself after Asante's prototype. Asante started his NCCF to counter the lack of a fathering presence in the lives of many African American and Hispanic children. He had flashed a "Fatherhood by any Means Necessary" t-shirt to close his remarks.

Payne recalled that his father - Congressman Donald Payne, Sr., - raised him and his sisters since their mother died early in their lives.

"I salute you because I'm still learning to be a father every day," said Payne. "I've four more events to go to today - but I made a point of making and having breakfast with my children. I was late because their mother wanted me to clean the floor before I left."

Young, Muhammad and most of the speakers also spread credit to 20 other individuals and organizations for their support. They included America Works, Newark Works, Men's Warehouse and the Nicholson and Victoria foundations.

Men's Warehouse had been asking for second-hand business suits in their recent commercials. Robinson, as style coordinator, gathers the suits from Men's Warehouse and other outlets and tailors them for interview-bound colleagues.

"Robinson started with the first six-week class," joked Muhammad, "and has stayed for six months."

Young has not announced when the next graduation for the next set of classes will be set.



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