

# Spectacular Black Chamber of New Jersey gala highlights Black History Month celebrations

By [Alexis Collins](#)

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(**Garfield, NJ**) – The night was full of Black excellence, powerful keynote speakers, and splendor at this year’s African American Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey’s (AACCNJ) 13th Annual Circle of Achievement Awards Gala, which was held on Thursday, February 16th at the Venetian. The theme of this year’s special occasion was Raising the Bar, honoring five outstanding individuals who’ve exemplified remarkable leadership in business, community service, sports, and politics. **The award recipients included Kenneth Bentley with the Diversity in Sports Award; Natalya Johnson, Esq. and Brenda Ross-Dulan with the Community Service Award; The Honorable Atlantic City Mayor, Marty Small Sr., with the Politics Award; and Capitol Police Officer Harry Dunn with the Gus Heningburg Award.**

“[Raising the Bar] symbolizes one, accountability amongst Black people that we cannot be complacent, we cannot be complicit, we always must strive for excellence, and there are perceptions that exist in the marketplace about Black people, we must shatter those perceptions to show that we’re great people who’ve done great things,” AACCNJ Chamber President and CEO John Harmon said. “The challenge is on us to be at the highest level possible, so we can push back on adversity, and really negotiate a better coexistence in society.”

It’s only fitting that this highly esteemed and cherished event took place during Black History Month, with the gala having a whopping 600-plus people in attendance and selling out tickets over a month

prior. Not only does this Black-Tie Event occur in conjunction with Black History Month every year, but the 2023 celebratory affair happened to coincide with AACCNJ celebrating its 15-year anniversary. For well over a decade, AACCNJ has staunchly promoted Black unification, health, education, and financial equity among New Jersey's 1.2 million Black residents, accelerating diversity and inclusion for people of color in multiple sectors and industries, facilitating free enterprise activities, instilling youth mentorship and workforce training with job readiness programs, decreasing poverty and unemployment, bridging the wealth gap between median white household incomes and Black ones, rectifying systemic racial issues, and promoting more Black people into leadership and entrepreneurial positions.

The magical night was filled with delicious food, entertainment, dancing, and a live band, commencing with a "Black Carpet Experience," where attendees were decked out in their gorgeous evening gowns, suits, and finery, from esteemed professionals and lawyers to several elected officials, dignitaries, and special guests from all over the Garden State. AACCNJ Chamber President and CEO John Harmon gave powerful opening remarks, reminding attendees of the foundational roots behind Black History Month and segueing into AACCNJ's mission and the symbolism regarding the gala. "Carter G. Woodson founded Black History Week, and in 1976, it was [President] Gerald Ford who expanded it to Black History Month, as a way of showcasing Black excellence. We have had as Black people in America, a lot of turmoil, but yet we're still here, and we're here today to really celebrate our ancestry, and show that we're still committed to being relevant and driving excellence, but we cannot do it alone. This is why all of you are here tonight," Harmon said. "The bar has definitely been elevated, not only in attendance, but in the understanding and the embrace of who we are."

Some of the event highlights included a speech from one of the honorees, Natalya G. Johnson, Esq., Senior Counsel at Johnson & Johnson and President of the Garden State Bar Association (GSBA), who noted that the GSBA is New Jersey's oldest and largest

professional organization for Black judges, lawyers, and law students, due in part to the activism of Black law students in the late 1960s after the Newark Riots. “Some people may challenge the purpose of the Black Bar, and some people may ask, ‘why should we continue to exist today?’ We exist and we persist because there is more work to be done in creating a just legal system. We exist because the number of Black lawyers does not reflect the diversity of our state and because we need more Black judges in New Jersey’s courtrooms. We exist because we need to help dismantle the systemic barriers plaguing our communities,” Johnson said. Jacqueline Baptiste, the Executive Assistant to John Harmon and one of the event coordinators, was also honored with a bouquet of flowers.

Another noteworthy moment transpired when the Mayor of Newark, The Honorable Ras J. Baraka, introduced one of the honorees, the Mayor of Atlantic City, The Honorable Marty Small Sr., before AACCNJ presented him with his award. Mayor Baraka joked that, “while Mayor Marty Small is here with us in Garfield, I know it’s a great day in Atlantic City,” saying that Mayor Small is performing an outstanding, transformative, and often thankless job in the famous community. “Mayor Small became the Mayor in a very unconventional way, sometimes people become leaders when they’re not looking for it, and those are the people we actually need to lead us,” Mayor Baraka said, which gives a nod to Mayor Small being unanimously sworn into office on Oct. 15, 2019, ultimately becoming the 4th African American Mayor in the history of Atlantic City. “When they came looking for the King, David was in the backyard, he wasn’t where everybody was looking, he didn’t look like what everybody thought he should be [as a] leader. Marty Small is the leader of Atlantic City, there have been a lot of Mayors of Atlantic City, but Marty Small is the leader of Atlantic City.” Mayor Small then took the stage to cheers, applause, and celebratory music, requesting that the band “play that back,” which they happily did.

## **Marty Small, Mayor of Atlantic City**

“I want to thank the African American Chamber of Commerce board members, staff, and all the honorees tonight for giving me the Politics Award, so with that being said, even though we are in Garfield, New Jersey, ‘I’m Atlantic City Born, I’m Atlantic City Bred, and when I die, I’m going to be Atlantic City Dead,’” Mayor Small said, quoting one of his favorite and widely-known slogans, which audience members gleefully shouted back at him. “When you think of the federal level, when you think of the state level, the county level, the municipal level, to choose me, Mayor of Atlantic City, Mayor of a town that constantly reinvents themselves, I was Mayor of a town that in 2008 when the economy crashed, they cancelled Atlantic City,” Mayor Small said. “No one was buying homes, the worldwide economy tanked, in 2012 you saw Hurricane Sandy come through Atlantic City and they sensationalized this story that the boardwalk blew up, but it didn’t, but we had to fight that fight. In 2014, five casinos closed, over 20,000 jobs lost, they said Atlantic City was over... 2016, the only municipality in the state to be taken over by the state, Atlantic City was finished. I got the Mayorship the unconventional way, but damn, I sure enough earned it, I’ve won seven elections in two years, winning by 78 percent of the vote so the people of Atlantic City could trust my leadership.”

Once the cheers and applause settled, Mayor Small continued, “A leader knows the way, shows the way, and goes the way, and that’s how we govern Atlantic City, and when you talk about ‘Raising the Bar,’ we raised the expectation level for city employees... you get raises, you get paid, you get promoted when the time is right. You’re not held back because you have a progressive leader who believes in people.” Mayor Small then announced that this Memorial Day weekend, under his leadership, Atlantic City is opening the largest beachfront indoor waterpark in the state of New Jersey, which cost \$100 million, in a bid to attract more tourists and families to increase revenue. “When people count out Atlantic City, I say, ‘count us in,’” Mayor Small said. He also encouraged people to continue patronize Atlantic City.

Before taking his seat, he directly addressed the AACCNJ, “prior to casino gaming, African American businesses were the hub of Atlantic

City, it's where everything went, the entire community focused on that," he said. "I oversee a city that it is a dying breed for African American businesses, but we're doing something about it." He added that his office engaged AACCNJ to facilitate the Mayor's Office Small Business Academy, graduating over 40 people, giving them business certificates and educating them on how to conduct a business. Mayor Small's administration also has a space for AACCNJ to help minority and African American businesses in Atlantic City obtain all the tools and resources that they need to make minority businesses established and relevant again in the town.