

## PRESS RELEASE

May 6, 2019

### ESSEX COUNTY FREEHOLDERS HOST 16<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL “ESSEX COUNTY CELEBRATES YOUTH” EVENT



Pictured are honorees, their coaches, and members of the Board of Freeholders at the Essex County Celebrates Youth Event. (PHOTO BY GLEN FRIESON)

(Newark, NJ) – The Essex County Board of Chosen Freeholders held its Annual “Essex County Celebrates Youth” Program on Wednesday, April 24, 2019, at the Hall of Records in Newark. This annual event acknowledges outstanding young people throughout Essex County for their notable achievements.

This year’s honorees were: **Benjamin Levitt** of Livingston High School, **Jaala Williams** of Montclair High School, **Kai Strothers** of Tuscan Elementary School in Maplewood, the **University High School Girls Basketball Team** of Newark, and the **East High School Boys Basketball Team** of Newark.

Freeholder Vice President Wayne Richardson began the program with welcoming remarks celebrating the achievements of the honorees. He encouraged them to continue to strive for excellence, and, as the future of Essex County, he motivated each honoree to lead the way.

**Benjamin Levitt**, a senior at Livingston High School, is the captain of the Livingston High School fencing team where he led his team, the Lancers, to the District 3 Championship. They also won State Squads in Sabre and the prestigious Cetrulo Invitational Fencing Tournament. He finished the regular season with only 1 loss in 72 bouts, and was named “Boys’ Fencer of the Year” for 2019 by *NJ.com*. During his high school fencing career, he was selected twice by the US Fencing Association to the All American High School’s 1st fencing team.

Outside of high school fencing, he participated in many international and national competitions where he earned top 16 finishes in the Cadet World Cup in Poland, a silver medal in the 2018 Pan American Cadet Championship, and a top 8 finish in the Junior North American Cup - leading his club team to the Junior Team gold title at the 2019 Junior Olympics.

After graduating this year, Ben plans to attend Ohio State University and continue his fencing at the next level.

**Jaala Williams**, a senior at Montclair High school, made history by participating in NJSIAA's Inaugural Girls Wrestling Championships at Atlantic City's famed Boardwalk Hall, where she defeated several opponents to claim a victory as the States Silver place winner in the 136 lb. weight class. As a sophomore, she broke the gender barrier when she joined her high school wrestling team and still receives recognition as Montclair's only female wrestler.



Jason Williams (father of Jaala), Jaala Williams, and Freeholder Leonard Luciano. (PHOTO BY GLEN FRIESON)

Jaala has competed in dozens of wrestling matches against both girls and boys. In 2019, she was one of the first girls ever to compete at the Essex County Tournament at the Richard J. Codey Arena in West Orange as part of an historic first season for girls wrestling in New Jersey. In addition, she qualified and placed at the NJSIAA District 11 individual championships in Red Bank, where she was one of only two Montclair wrestlers to qualify for Regionals. She went on to defeat several opponents at Regionals, and was Montclair's sole wrestler to advance to the State finals in Atlantic City.

When she is not competing on the wrestling mat, Jaala has a passion for architecture and an interest in Science and Technology. She is enrolled in programs such as Black Girls Code, the Weston Science Academy at Montclair State University, the Army's ARDEC Gems, and the W.E.B DuBois Scholars Institute at Princeton University. She has received a scholarship by Udacity for Computer Programming, is a member of the National Society of High School Scholars, and dedicates her time to mentor and encourage other young athletes to pursue and participate in wrestling regardless of their gender.



Kai Strothers and Freeholder Vice President Wayne Richardson. (PHOTO BY GLEN FRIESON)

**Kai Strothers**, a 5th grade student at Tuscan Elementary School in Maplewood, made history in New Jersey on January 19, 2019, by becoming the youngest person to bowl a sanctioned 300 point perfect game at the age of 10!

Kai has been bowling with the Junior league since he was 4 years old, is a member of the Metropolitan Bowling Senate, and has traveled extensively while bowling in tournaments. He was part of the winning team for The National Bowling Association, Inc. (TNBA) Eastern Regional Junior Tournament that traveled to Detroit, Michigan, for the National Roll Off in 2018. He also recently won 1st place in the TNBA Eastern Regional Junior Tournament in Durham, North Carolina. In July, he will travel back to Detroit, Michigan, to compete in the Youth Open and Junior Gold Championships.

On February 10, 2019, Kai was invited by the Professional Bowlers Association (PBA) to be a special guest to the Tournament of Champions in Akron, Ohio, and threw out the first ball. He is very passionate and knowledgeable about the sport and bears the nickname “Popcorn” because while bowling he was snacking on popcorn and it was said the secret was in the popcorn.

Kai attends Tabernacle Baptist Church in Newark where he is a member of the Youth Choir, the Youth Ministry, and is also a Youth Usher.

The **University High School Girls Basketball Team** was honored by the Board for their tremendous 2018-2019 season. The team captured the 2018-2019 NJSIAA Group 1 Girls Basketball State Championship, the 2018-2019 Divisional Championship, and the 2018-2019 Newark Christmas Tournament Championship. The University High Lady Phoenix has won four straight Christmas Tournament Championships, four straight sectional titles, and three state championships.

The team is comprised of: **Seniors:** Aida Diana, Nyshaya Holmes, and Joscelyn Williams; **Juniors:** Reni’a Kennedy and Zyhemia Swint; **Sophomores:** Kamrin Babbs, Ra’Myah DeGioia, Tara Johnson, Taneshia Tucker, and Sidney Williams; **Freshmen:** Semya Bryant, Wadiah Findley and Alana Nickels.

Individually, several players were recognized for their outstanding play during the season. Tanisha Tucker was named First Team All Group 1, Tara Johnson and Nyshaya Holms earned 2nd Team All Group 1; and Sidney Williams, Zyhemia Swint and Joscelyn Williams all received Group 1 Honorable Mention.

Coaches Amiri Baraka, Jr., and Cornelius Hunt were also in attendance and honored with the team.



Head Coach Anthony Tavares and Assistant Coach John Thomason (center), Freeholder Robert Mercado (right) and members of the State Champion East Side High School Boys Basketball Team. (PHOTO BY GLEN FRIESON)

The **East Side High School Boys Basketball** was honored for winning the 2019 NJSIAA Group 4 Boys Basketball Championship and the 2019 Essex County Championship. The team finished its phenomenal 2018-2019 season ranked as the #6 team in the State of New Jersey, and the State’s #1 Group 4 team with an overall record of 29-5.

The team is comprised of **Seniors:** Anas Amos, Jeter DeLeon, Al-Tawan Hawkins, James Paul, Denzel Small, Andrew Speight, Jared White, Nasir Johnson, and Nyheim Carter; **Juniors:** Mikah Johnson, Gabriel Olaniyi, and Isiah King-Lucas; **Sophomore:** Haziz Adeshima; and **Freshman:** Jahzeer Gaskins

Individually, several players were recognized for their distinguished play during the season. Senior Anas Amos was named the *NJ.com* Essex County Player of the Year, as well as the *Sideline Chatter* All-Essex County Player of the Year. He was also named 2<sup>nd</sup> Team All State by *NJ.com* and earned SEC American Division 1<sup>st</sup> Team. Junior Mikah Johnson was named All Group 4 1st team, SEC American Division 2nd team, and All-Essex County 3rd team. Senior Nasir Johnson was named SEC American Division 1st team and All-Essex County 2nd team. Seniors James Paul and Denzel Small were named SEC American Division Honorable Mention.

In addition, Co-Head Coaches Anthony Tavares and Bryant Garvin were chosen as the *NJ.com* State “Coaches of the Year”, and the Essex County Coaches of the Year by *NJ.com* and *Sideline Chatter*.

Eliana Pintor Morin offered greetings to the honorees on behalf of County Executive Joe DiVincenzo, and the audience was graced with a performance of the “*The Star Spangled Banner*” by Jacob-Malachi Appiah of Montclair High School, as well as a rendition of “*Tell the World*” by Lecrae. Also in attendance were Freeholders Robert Mercado of District 1, Leonard Luciano of District 4, Carlos Pomares of District 5, and At-Large Freeholders Romaine Graham and Patricia Sebold.

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