

## Rutgers hosts author of book about Newark



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By Kelsey Weidmann | 09/22/14

Robert Curvin, author of “Inside Newark: Decline, Rebellion, and the Search for Transformation,” spoke yesterday at the Eagleton Institute of Politics on Douglass.

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As a child, Robert Curvin would often take bike rides through Newark — along the river, down in the ironbound or past the chocolate factory where he hoped to get some sweets tossed to him. “[The city] is in my DNA,” he said.

Curvin spoke about his new book, “Inside Newark: Decline, Rebellion, and the Search for Transformation,” last night at a book talk hosted by the Eagleton Institute of Politics on Douglass campus.

In his book, the civil rights leader and visiting scholar at the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy examines the city’s history, politics and culture, and talks about all the issues impacting it.

Despite its challenges, he claims Newark will once again become a booming, vibrant city. During the 1950s, Newark was a successful industrial city, but it has gone through numerous riots and rebellions over time. Curvin argues Newark has fallen because its leaders fail to work through the hardships the city faces.

He said if those in power can work to improve the social and economic states of the people and reform education, participate in the local government, manage finances and partner with businesses, the city will have a real chance at change.

The book has been described as “not just a scholarly book and not just a memoir, but a hybrid.” Curvin agrees, saying he writes about personal stories, like how he participated in the **rebellion**, and he came to the conclusion that everyone can tell their story.

Curvin was born in Newark, and even though he grew up in neighboring Belleville, the city was always a part of his life. One of nine children, he grew up without money to go on vacation — instead, he would go to visit his aunt in Newark.

As a “Newarker,” Curvin believes he needs to get his story out for people to hear. To research the story, he interviewed 60 people from Newark who have participated in the life of the city and captured their stories on video.

Curvin said these videos are one of the most powerful things to come out of the project because they will be available far into the future for others to experience.

The book tries to give the reader a sense of what Newark is really like with its relationships, government and other factors, Curvin said.

One challenge Newark faces is that it is a narrow city, and the airport and seaport take up a large chunk of it. This leaves little room for residential and commercial communities to prosper. “Twenty-four plus acres, but maybe about 17 of those acres are actually available for residential and commercial [use],” Curvin said.

The population and type of people has a large impact on the city as well, Curvin said. In 1960, the city was composed of two-thirds white to one-third minority. By 1970, it was the complete opposite, with two-thirds minority and one-third white, Curvin said.

Curvin said leadership has really affected the city. Most of the mayors began with good intentions but were unable to carry them out.

Kenneth Gibson, the first black mayor of a large northeastern city, and Sharpe James, another former Newark major, made major accomplishments, but ultimately became too self-interested and greedy to focus on the improvement of the city.

James oversaw major developments like the Performing Arts Center and the development of Springfield Avenue, but Curvin said he could have done much more.

Curvin said even Cory Booker “overpromised.” He did not devote much time to managing the city. In a management sense, he did nothing to change the things he claimed he would.

Janz Gonzalez, a School of Arts and Sciences senior, said he was sad, but not surprised to hear that the mayors had little influence on the city.

He said unfortunately, much of the time they are focused too much on money to actually make a difference.

The Institute often hosts book talks to highlight fresh takes on politics, and Curvin’s new book fit in perfectly, said Kathy Kleeman, senior communications officer of the Eagleton Institute of Politics and the Center for American Women and Politics.

Kleeman said many students who attend Rutgers are from Newark, so they would be interested on learning about the city’s past and present circumstances.

“Since it’s New Jersey’s largest city, and since it is in many ways an example of where American cities have been and where they’re headed, the subject should be of interest to anyone concerned about the future of our state and nation,” Kleeman said.

Curvin stresses at the end of the book that leadership really matters. He said good leadership knows how to manage differences and conflict.

“I think leadership that is honest, that has a vision even if it can’t be truly realized but speaks to the needs of people, can make a difference,” Curvin said.