



PUTTING OUT FIRES

In politics and the firehouse, Matt Klapper C'05 has learned to take the heat.

BY KATHRYN LEVY FELDMAN

PHOTOGRAPH BY CANDACE DICARLO



On duty, Thanksgiving Day 2013.

About six years ago, while traveling along the Garden State Parkway, Cory Booker—the recently elected junior United States Senator from New Jersey, then mayor of Newark—and Matt Klapper C’05, one of his policy advisors, came upon a car that had just been involved in an accident. The airbag had been deployed; the driver was semi-conscious but the ambulance had yet to arrive.

“Without thinking about it, Matt and I started sprinting to the car,” Booker recounts. “In my mind, I was Batman and he was Robin—but when we get to the vehicle, he was the one barking orders. He told me to get into the back seat and stabilize the guy’s neck, while he forced the front door open, and calmly started talking to the victim, checking his vitals and assessing the injury.

“Meanwhile, in the back seat, I noticed smoke in the car. I had made up my mind that I wasn’t leaving this guy, no matter what, but I also suggested to Matt that we think about getting him out of the car before we all blew up.”

At that point, Booker recalls, Klapper looked at him quizzically. “‘Cory,’ he told me, ‘That’s smoke from the airbag.’ That’s how naïve I was. I have talents, but my friend Matt Klapper has many more. It wasn’t the first time I realized how multi-faceted he is.”

Chief among Klapper’s gifts, apparently, is the ability to live two (at least) lives simultaneously. For the past 14 years, Klapper has worked for Booker, starting as a volunteer, then as a policy advisor, chief policy advisor, campaign policy director, and now as the senior advisor to New Jersey’s first-ever African-American US Senator. During that time, he earned his undergraduate degree from Penn and a law degree from Yale University. Oh, and he also completed the perhaps-even-more stringent (and certainly more physically taxing) requirements to become a full-time firefighter in New Jersey—a journey that included volunteering as a firefighter for more than eight years, as well as serving with an ambulance squad.

Klapper fulfilled his boyhood dream in early 2011, the same year he became Booker’s chief policy advisor, taking a job with a firehouse located about five miles west of Newark that allows his standard

shifts to fall almost entirely on nights and weekends. For two years, he drew no salary or benefits from the city of Newark, instead supporting himself as a firefighter and through part-time work at the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank. “Being a firefighter is my childhood dream come true. Being policy advisor to Cory was my dream job,” says Klapper. “Declining to take a salary from the City of Newark, in the wake of extensive lay-offs, was a way to do everything I loved at the same time.”

“I don’t get much sleep,” Klapper admits, but aside from that, the two jobs balance each other perfectly, he adds. “I’m able to hit a re-set button and ground myself at the firehouse. It’s the difference between doing good versus hoping you’re doing good. It’s hard to beat that direct feedback loop.”

Following Booker’s October win in a special election to finish out the late Frank Lautenberg’s Senate term and his resulting relocation to Washington, it’s unclear how long Klapper can keep up this dual existence. Every 72 hours, he is responsible for his 24-hour shift in the New Jersey firehouse. So far, by juggling vacation days, shift switches, and working holidays, he has managed to arrange it so that his shifts continue to fall on weekends and holidays, delaying a career move that could douse his passion. “It’s not a decision I’m afraid of,” he says. “But up to this point I’ve been able to do both.”

The Booker-Klapper relationship goes back to when Klapper was a junior at Pingry School, an independent college prep school in Martinsville, New Jersey. Booker was on Newark’s city council at the time, and came to speak at the school’s Martin Luther King Day assembly. As a member of Pingry’s African American Culture Club, Klapper—winner of national and international student awards for film-making—had made a video about the slain civil-rights leader.

“It was an awesome video, very professional,” Booker recalls. In fact, he was so impressed that at the end of the assembly he offered Klapper the opportunity to make his first fundraising film (for his unsuccessful 2002 mayoral run). “I wish I could take credit for recognizing Matt as a diamond in the rough,” Booker adds, “but the truth is, Matt is the kind

of guy who makes an impact on the people he meets. He was and is an obvious superstar.”

At the time, Booker was living in Newark public housing. Klapper recalls visiting his sparsely furnished apartment and then spending a week talking to various people in the candidate’s life.

“I interviewed firefighters, members of tenant-advocacy groups, people who had been touched by him in various ways,” he recalls. Though the resulting 25-minute film was “too long to be good,” the experience convinced him that Booker was the real deal.

“The people he attracts are idealistic,” Klapper says. “He hates cynicism and convention. If you hear him speak, it’s usually enough to become addicted to his way of doing government.

“I got into this through film-making,” he adds, “but I began to see politics as a means to an end.”

Klapper was still expecting to become a film-maker when he came to Penn, having applied early decision. “Of course, I didn’t take a single film class during my years there,” he says. He ended up majoring in American history and political science, serving as class president during all four of his years on campus, and winning the Spoon Award as a senior.

His first presidential campaign “started as a lark,” he recalls. “I had attended the PennQuest pre-freshman orientation trip, so I knew a lot of people before classes started. One of my friends suggested I run based on this. There were 13 people running, and from my understanding I won by a very narrow margin.”

From then on, however, he ran unopposed, leading an interviewer for *34th Street Magazine* to propose the term “dynasty” to describe his freshman-to-senior-year run. (“I wouldn’t say that,” Klapper replied, noting that others had achieved the same feat, but he did say that he was “really proud” of having served all four years and “really happy he got the opportunity to do it.”) But while building his “dynasty,” Klapper also spent a lot of time driving back and forth to the Newark area to volunteer as an EMT and firefighter, and working for Booker on campaigns and for his non-profit community-service organizations, Newark Now and Newark Do Something.

When the 9/11 terrorists struck the World

Trade Center at the start of his freshman year, Klapper rushed to New York as a First Responder as the twin towers collapsed. “As soon as I saw it, I got all my stuff and ran down to the train station,” he told *The Daily Pennsylvanian* in 2001. He managed to get rides with different police officers to Chelsea Piers, a staging area for volunteers and rescue workers.

It turned out to be a long night of modest contributions, according to Klapper, since there wasn’t much to do for someone with his (at that point) basic level of training. He worked through the night giving minor first-aid to other rescue workers and then went back to school.

In 2002, he volunteered for Booker’s first mayoral campaign, assisting the press secretary. Booker lost that race narrowly to longtime incumbent mayor and Democratic power broker Sharpe James in an ugly campaign that was immortalized in the Oscar-nominated 2005 documentary *Street Fight* (on which Klapper has a credit for camera work).

Klapper was “devastated” by Booker’s defeat. The experience prompted considerable soul searching. “I saw this as the ideal politician losing to the ‘political machine,’ and I began to question whether or not politics could be effective at helping people,” he says. “In fact, I questioned it all through college.”

But when the next mayoral race rolled around in 2006, James opted not to run for reelection (two years later, he was convicted on fraud charges in federal court, ultimately serving 18 months of a 27-month prison sentence), and Booker cruised to a win with 72 percent of the vote. Klapper had worked on that campaign as well, and was invited to join Booker’s team as a policy advisor. He decided to “give it a shot for a year,” he says.

From the beginning, the pace was blistering. Newark was the poster child for urban decay. With high unemployment that only grew worse with the Great Recession and only 13 percent of its citizens holding college degrees, the city was rife with poverty, crime, drug abuse, and despair. Booker proclaimed it his mission to make Newark “America’s leading urban city in safety, prosperity, and family life.”

Having previously attracted national attention during his city council days when he went on a 10-day hunger strike to draw attention to the city’s poverty,

Booker continued to make headlines as he morphed into “Super-Mayor,” seemingly everywhere all the time. He shoveled constituents out of the snow, rescued a neighbor from a burning building (“I took a lot of heat for that,” jokes Klapper), carried a dog in from the freezing cold, and lived on a food-stamp budget of \$4 a day. And Booker proved as adept at harnessing social media as the traditional variety, gathering more than a million Twitter followers, for example. Some may call these acts “stunts,” but according to Klapper, Booker is always “looking to help people in any way he can.”

There had been 107 homicides in Newark in 2006, plus a horrific triple homicide in early 2007. One of Klapper’s assignments involved Booker’s public-

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safety initiative. Following his mentor’s example, the first thing he did was move into what he calls a “real neighborhood,” at Grand Avenue and Arsdale Place—which turned out to be the sixth worst corner in Newark for crime, a fact he did not know before he signed the lease.

“The first night I moved in, a kid was murdered in the street outside my apartment,” he recalls. “That said, 99 percent of the people in that area were wonderful, hardworking people. My downstairs neighbor worked two jobs so her daughter could go to law school. It was a small percentage of the neighborhood that made it dangerous, a fact I never would have known if I hadn’t lived there. It also truly motivated me to make things better.”

Next, he spent a lot of time mapping out the 25 square miles of the city, determining that 80 percent of murders occurred within seven square miles. On the mayor’s behalf, Klapper spearheaded the development of a public-safety camera and gunshot-acoustic detection pro-

gram. “I climbed on the roofs of a lot of buildings,” he recalls with a laugh, referring to the work he and others did plotting the program’s wireless network.

As a member of Booker’s small, young staff, Klapper found himself involved in all aspects of policy-making: creating, implementing, and evaluating programs, and working with constituents throughout the city, from the police to community violence-reduction groups to the ACLU. “It was municipal policy work, not politics,” he emphasizes.

The wireless crime-fighting initiative, which received major funding from private philanthropy and local businesses, took a year to research and less than a year to implement. It’s currently the state’s largest wireless network of crime-

fighting technology, linking acoustic and visual technologies to trace the sounds of gunshots to locations in real time.

“If a sensor picks up the sound of a gunshot, cars are dispatched, cameras are focused on the area, saving valuable minutes in response time for police and ambulances,” Klapper explains. “The person pulling the trigger has to think twice. His action is being detected by its noise as well as by security cameras. It’s imperfect, but as part of a lot of strategies it has been effective.”

During Booker’s time in office, there has been a 27 percent drop in shootings and a 17 percent drop in murders in Newark.

Klapper also worked in support of other mayoral efforts to improve life in the city, including doubling the amount of affordable housing, cleaning up and expanding parks and recreation spaces, pumping private investment into economic development, creating a network of resources and programs for men and women coming home from incarceration,

instituting New Jersey's first youth and community courts, and developing an innovative local model for the delivery of services to veterans.

But even as he moved up the chain from low-level policy advisor to Super-Mayor sidekick, Klapper continued to volunteer nights and weekends as a firefighter and member of an ambulance squad. Requirements for becoming a firefighter vary by state—and, in New Jersey, by county and department as well. Of the 689 fire departments in the state, three-quarters are what the US Fire Administration classifies as “volunteer,” which means that 100 percent of a department's firefighters are unpaid. Almost all professional firefighters begin their careers as volunteers, since New Jersey law gives preference to volunteers when filling vacancies. Klapper's firehouse is in a department that has a combination of professional-career firefighters and volunteers.

“Being a volunteer requires the same training as the career guys,” explains Chris Esposito, a career firefighter who was a volunteer with Klapper from 2006 to 2012. “It's a rigorous vetting process that includes psychological and physical testing, a state-set curriculum, and constant re-training. There is a lot of testing.”

At minimum, all New Jersey firefighters must be over 18, have a valid New Jersey driver's license, and possess a basic knowledge of hazardous materials, chemical safety, blood-borne pathogens, and the firefighter's self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA). They also must meet strenuous physical requirements.

Volunteers have to put in at least 10 hours riding time a month, although, according to Esposito, “you can be as active as you want to be.” There are required drills twice a month, and volunteers must be prepared to respond to calls for additional backup at any time. Full-time firefighters work a 24-hour shift, with 72 hours off.

Besides the required courses and training, full-time firefighters must pass the Firefighter Entry Examination, a multi-part evaluation that includes a variety of physical and psychological measurements; a physical-ability test encompassing a stair climb, hose drag, equipment carry, and ladder-raise, among other skills; a written examination; peer evaluations from fire officers; and personal interviews.

Klapper passed the test his junior year in college, but openings are scarce and,

like many applicants, he didn't get a job. He re-tested in the fall of 2010, earned the top score, and was hired full-time in February 2011, as he was starting his last semester of law school.

Klapper dates his obsession with firefighting back to his childhood, when he would often watch *Jeopardy* with his neighbor, a retired history professor at the City College of New York.

“He was a firefighter in New York in World War II, and he took me to the local firehouse on a regular basis,” Klapper recalls. When he was 17, he signed up with his local First Aid Squad, and applied to be a firefighter once he turned 18. “Most little boys grow up wanting to be firefighters, but not everyone does it,” he acknowledges. “I had applied to become a firefighter prior to September 11, but it certainly strengthened my resolve.”

At the firehouse Klapper is “one of the guys,” says Esposito. “The firehouse is like an extended family. It's definitely not cut-throat like a corporate environment; we're more like a team.”

That camaraderie extends deeper than casual friendship, Klapper notes. “It's very inspiring to hang out with a bunch of guys who you know would risk everything for you or for strangers.”

There are seven firefighters per shift and the typical routine might include vehicle and equipment maintenance, skills training, scheduled fire-safety inspections in commercial and industrial buildings, scheduled school tours or fire-safety demonstrations, and time for physical training.

“We usually eat around 8 p.m. and have some downtime,” says 15-year career firefighter Gabe Ianella, with lights out at 11 p.m. “But a fire might happen at any moment. We sleep in our clothes and train to be in our gear and ready to go in 70 seconds. We try to cat-nap at night, but it's not really sleep.”

In recent years, Klapper's firehouse has averaged between six and eight emergencies a day. Last year's Superstorm Sandy brought a couple of “crazy days,” when everyone was on duty pretty much around the clock, according to Esposito. While there wasn't much flooding in the area, there was a lot of wind damage, as well as downed trees and live wires.

Deputy Chief Eric Evers says that Klapper is “very devoted to the job and

has proved that he can fit in,” despite the requisite pranks (fake spiders, and a water bomb dropped on him from a timed device in the ceiling at 3:00 a.m., among others).

“Not only does he have the smarts, he has the [physical] dexterity,” says Tim Duetsch, a career firefighter who has known Klapper since his EMT days. “Usually you have one or the other.”

“Matt has a big personality and a unique ability to talk to anybody at any level and connect with people,” says Brian Harnois, who has been in the same firehouse as Klapper since 2004. “It's all about helping people. We've got front row seats to the greatest show in the world. You see the best and the worst in people, but it's hard to beat the rush of doing CPR and saving somebody's life or cutting somebody out of a car. It's what we do on a daily basis. We're all very Type A personalities who like to take chaos and organize it. Sort of like what Matt does every day.”

Two years after Booker's election as mayor, Klapper left City Hall to enter Yale Law School (of which Booker is also an alumnus). He managed to limit himself to just two jobs—law student and volunteer firefighter—until the fall of 2010, when Booker came calling again.

“It was a terrible few months during the recession, and the budget process was daunting,” Klapper recalls. “The budget has to balance every year, and the shrinking revenue was threatening everything that Cory had accomplished in Newark.” Klapper says that some of the hardest decisions from this period involved his work with budget teams that eliminated jobs held by people he knew.

Also not easy: his commute. Still in law school, he was traveling back and forth to Yale (about two hours each way)—and continuing to pull his shifts at the firehouse. “I remember getting off my shift at the firehouse at 8:00 a.m. and getting to my 10 a.m. class a few minutes late,” he says with a laugh. “I would smell great, by the way!”

After they got through the budget crisis, Booker offered him the post of chief policy advisor. One of his signature achievements during this period was helping usher



Cory Booker on the campaign trail. His win in October's special election made him New Jersey's first African-American US Senator—and created a dilemma for Matt Klapper.

through a reorganization of higher education in New Jersey, merging Rutgers University and the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey. The legislation created new governance structures among and within Rutgers' Newark, New Brunswick, and Camden campuses, as well as a partnership with Rowan University in South Jersey. Klapper calls this package "arguably the biggest and most difficult legislation passed through the legislature in a decade"; it required a lot of bipartisan compromise and also protected Newark's University hospital, he says. For his efforts Klapper was ranked No. 85 on last year's *NJBIZ* Power 100 list of the most influential people in New Jersey business.

"Matt played an important role in a lot of complicated negotiations, always looking out for the constituency of Mayor Booker," says Charlie McKenna, chief counsel to New Jersey Governor Chris Christie. "He worked hard to grasp difficult concepts and synthesize a lot of information. He's a great guy. I always tell him that we'll all be working for him someday."

The question is, will that be in New Jersey or Washington?

New Jersey's special election for US Senator took place on Wednesday, October 16—a date chosen by Governor Christie with an eye, critics charged, to avoiding having the popular Booker on the same ballot on the regular election date in November, which might have reduced the margin of

victory in his own reelection (by a landslide, as it turned out). In the Senate contest, Booker defeated Tea Party-backed Republican Steve Loneran, the former mayor of Bogota, New Jersey, by 11 points.

The campaign featured some acrimonious debates and attacks by Loneran on Booker's record as mayor and his appetite for publicity ("We need a leader, not a Tweeter," he said at one point). Booker countered by painting Loneran as an extremist, but for the most part ran on his record of finding pragmatic solutions to civic problems and growing the economy in Newark.

As policy director, Klapper headed a 10-person team that helped the candidate craft positions on everything from environmental issues to foreign affairs. "It was inspiring to work for a campaign where the candidate's ideas for what would help people came first and everything else, from the politics to the communications, had to fit into that," he says. "It's usually the other way around, but Booker wouldn't have any of it."

Klapper has committed to serving in his current post of senior advisor for as many months as it takes to get his boss "transitioned."

"When your United States Senator calls, you answer," he says. "But before I make any decision regarding my future as a firefighter, I need more information." Until Lautenberg's death and Booker's resulting Senate bid, Klapper's plan had

been to continue to advise his old mentor as mayor, he says, while focusing on "firefighting and starting an emergency-services-company I wrote a business plan for while in law school," he says.

Deepening Klapper's current dilemma is that fact that, if he were to leave the firehouse, there's no going back, at least not without completing the multiple-year qualification process all over again—assuming there would be an opening, which is rare.

On the other hand, there's every indication that Klapper has hitched himself to a rising star in Booker—who, even before becoming Senator (and despite his formal declarations to the contrary), was being touted as a possible 2016 vice presidential contender in media outlets like *Politico* and *The Washington Post*. First though, he'll have to run for Senate again in 2014, when Lautenberg's term was set to expire, to win his own full six-year Senate term. And he sounds as if he'd very much like to have Klapper by his side when he does.

"I really do rely on [Matt]," Booker says. "That said, he's delayed a lot of his life for me over the years to accommodate his mission of service, and he could make an impact in whatever he chooses to pursue, including the private sector. But I tend to think that one of the most hallowed institutions on the planet [the United States Senate] will be persuasive enough for a guy like Matt."

If not, it wouldn't be the first time Klapper has turned down seemingly golden opportunities.

"There are not too many Penn grads with law degrees that are firefighters," notes Deputy Chief Evers. "Matt is very good at the job, devoted to it, and has turned down a lot of jobs because he loves the firehouse."

At the end of the day, according to Klapper, it is a "clarity issue."

"I don't love politics," he says. "I love working for Cory Booker—who truly is a different kind of politician—the intellectual vigor of policy making, and those moments when you know you helped a lot of people. But the push and pull of politics sometimes wears on me. When I ride out on a fire engine, I know I am protecting my small corner of New Jersey. The purity and clarity of that sort of doing good is incredibly powerful." ♦

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