

“Don’t Give Up the Fight” – Claudia Gordon

As a young girl growing up in the Jamaican countryside in the 1970s, Claudia Gordon’s childhood was like many others until sudden and severe ear pain at the age of eight resulted in permanent deafness. Even though she remained the same energetic, intelligent, and inquisitive child, those around her treated her differently. She was ridiculed by her community and overlooked by family who did not know how to communicate with her. Gordon was immediately removed from school and instead kept home to do chores – without any plans for an education or a future.

Through her mother’s hard work as a laundress and drive to provide opportunities for her children, Gordon and her family were able to immigrate to the South Bronx when she was eleven. In New York, Gordon was able to re-start her education at the Lexington School and Center for the Deaf. Even though she was a high-achiever and top student, Gordon’s intersectionality of being both black and deaf often made her feel “present yet invisible.” She recognized early on that opportunities would not just fall in her lap, and she would have to “make space” for herself and for others with disabilities.

As early as her junior year of high school, Gordon knew that she wanted to study law to help create those same spaces for persons with disabilities that society affords to others. “I want to contribute to a better society where there is more understanding and acceptance of people with disabilities and where the same opportunities are provided for all,” said Gordon.

Gordon first graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from Howard University, then went on to complete law school at American University, Washington College of Law where, in 2000, she became the first known deaf, African- American woman to earn a Juris Doctor degree. While working as a Skadden Fellow and staff attorney at the National Association of the Deaf, Gordon felt the pull towards work in the federal government. She saw it as an effective way to take action and enforce laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

In 2005, as a Senior Policy Advisor for the Department of Homeland Security, Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, Gordon was in New Orleans immediately following Hurricane Katrina. There, she focused on enforcing executive orders as they apply to deaf and other people with disabilities in emergency preparedness situations. She took that same drive to the Department of Labor after being appointed by the Obama Administration to the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs in 2009. At the Department of Labor, Gordon was able to engage in her lifelong goal of “creating spaces” for those who may have not previously had access to jobs because of their disability. She brought attention to deficits in disability policies, focused on creating a sense of access to the White House for disabled constituents, and enacted tangible change for employees (or potential employees) of federal agencies.

Just this month, Gordon was appointed by President Biden to serve as a Council Member on the National Council on Disability. She looks forward to continue using her “unique lens” to advance the equality of disabled people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Gordon shared that her motivation is often as simple as the Bob Marley song that she often heard as a child in in Jamaica: “Get up, stand up. Stand up for your right. Get up, stand up. Don’t give up the fight.”