

HARD WORK, PERSEVERANCE,
AND A BELIEF IN ONESELF

Impact Achievement

By *Claudia Gordon*



PHOTO CREDIT THE WHITE HOUSE

Claudia Gordon is the special assistant to the director of the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs. She was recently an associate director in the White House Office of Public Engagement, where she worked as a liaison to the disability community and advised on disability policies.

Prior to those positions, Gordon was a senior policy advisor with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL). While at the DHS, she managed the CRCL Disability Policy Team. She also managed the Interagency Coordinating Council on Emergency Preparedness and Individuals with Disabilities.

In 2000, Gordon received the prestigious Skadden Fellowship to work as a staff attorney with the National Association of the Deaf Law Center. She has also worked as a consulting attorney with the National Council on Disability. In 2006, she received the Secretary's Gold Medal Award from then-DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff in recognition of her exemplary work on behalf of people with disabilities in the Gulf Coast both during and after Hurricane Katrina.

As a child growing up in a rural town in Jamaica, West Indies, I suddenly lost my hearing at 8 years old. My outlook on life became very bleak, especially because of the severe lack of disability awareness and the scarcity of services and resources to support my inclusion in, and access to, mainstream society. The perception and attitudes towards me were more disabling than my newly acquired disability.

I was taken out of school and kept at home to perform domestic chores and pass countless hours in isolation. I struggled to reconcile the low expectations imposed upon me with my own innate belief that I was capable of much more. Thanks to the anchoring of strong women in my life—my mother, grandmother, and aunts—I learned, over time, that my disability would not define me. Only I could do that. I grew to understand that the voices of doubt neither dictated my worth nor my capacity.

At 11 years old, I emigrated from Jamaica to the South Bronx in New York City. I attended the Lexington School for the Deaf in Queens, New York, where I graduated as valedictorian of my high school class in 1991—one year after the passage of the landmark Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The passage of the ADA gave me a sense of hope that perhaps this was the time in history where people with disabilities would finally be treated fairly, with dignity and respect. The ADA symbolized the hope of a more inclusive society, where individuals with disabilities like me could have

the chance to live up to our full potential.

Helen Keller said, "Life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all," so I stubbornly chose to continue my adventure against those whose expectations of me were misguided by my disability, race, gender, and inner city zip code.

In 1995, I became the first in my family to receive a college degree when I graduated cum

laude from Howard University in Washington, D.C. I went on to complete law school at American University's Washington College of Law in 2000.

Throughout my life, I found that hard work and perseverance were vital to my advancement. So was the support of a trusted network of family, friends, teachers, and mentors. I've learned that whatever experiences, struggles, and challenges I've had to overcome, I must not fall victim to my circumstances but rather allow them to be a part of my learning and growth. The career that I am privileged to enjoy today is not in spite of who I am or the obstacles I've had to overcome—but because of them.

It is fair to say that I have built my career in public service on the premise that every person—regardless of who they are, where they come from, and whatever their disability—ought to have the opportunity to access the American dream. Therefore, it was a privilege to be called upon to lead the White House's efforts to engage members of the disability community and assist with advancing inclusion, access, and equality of opportunity for people with disabilities.

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