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Joi Gordon:

Suiting up for service to others

BY JONELLA FRANK

As an undergraduate student, Joi Mathlin Gordon ('93) had a plan. She knew exactly what she would be when she grew up: a television reporter. Not surprisingly, that plan changed as years passed. However, by keeping an open mind and heart, Gordon eventually found her calling as the CEO of Dress for Success Worldwide, an international nonprofit organization. Her enthusiasm and passion is evident when she speaks about the organization that provides professional attire and career development support to help disadvantaged women thrive in work and life.

Gordon was born in New York City and lived there with her mother until age 10. Her mother worked multiple jobs to send her only child to private school. In 1978, a job opportunity with American Airlines brought mother and daughter to Tulsa, Oklahoma. Gordon continued her private school education there and graduated from Bishop Kelley High School.

After visiting a friend enrolled at the University of Oklahoma, Gordon decided to attend OU. As an undergraduate studying radio/television broadcasting, she envisioned herself as a television reporter or news anchor. However, when faced with the financial reality of starting salaries for television reporters, Gordon retooled her plan and applied for admission to the OU College of Law.

“I left law school with more than my degree. I was able to walk with confidence.”

She thought a law degree would complement her journalism degree, enabling her to be a television legal analyst. During her second year of law school, a trusted friend and mentor inquired about her plans after graduation. Gordon shared her plan for using both degrees to become a “kinder, nicer Nancy Grace.” This time, the dose of reality was delivered by her friend, “Why would anyone believe you? You’ve never even been in a courtroom.”

With that in mind, when she graduated from OU Law and had an opportunity to return to New York City as an assistant in the Office of the Bronx District Attorney, she took the job. She joined 400 other Bronx assistant district attorneys and managed an average active caseload of 90 misdemeanors and felonies. The work was hectic and stressful. Gordon came to feel her sole purpose was trying to incarcerate people. It was, she said, “a job that I did not love. It was not my dream job, but only a means to an end.”

While Gordon was on maternity leave from the district attorney’s office in 1996, she received a call from a co-worker concerned that she had extended her leave and was not returning to work as originally planned. During their conversation, the co-worker mentioned a job opening for director of court programs at Victim Services, an agency housed in the same courthouse where Gordon had been working as a prosecutor. Gordon applied for the job and was hired. While working with this organization, her plan evolved further. She realized her passion was for women’s issues.

That passion led Gordon to make a telephone call in response to a television news segment she had seen about a new nonprofit organization, Dress for Success. The program, founded in 1997 in New York City by a student using a \$5,000 inheritance from her great-grandfather, collected



Joi Gordon tours OU Law with Sheridan Haynes, director of alumni affairs and development.

used women's suits and redistributed them to disadvantaged women attempting to enter the job market. Gordon had suits to give, so she called to find out how make the donation.

The call was answered by the organization's founder, Nancy Lublin, who skillfully maneuvered Gordon from donating suits to serving on the board of directors. Gordon volunteered on the Dress for Success board, and her initial belief about the organization was solidified. "Dress for Success made perfect sense to me," she said. In 1999, Gordon accepted the position of executive director of Dress for Success New York.

Dress for Success continued its expansion in the United States and internationally. In 2002, Lublin retired and Gordon took over as CEO of Dress for Success Worldwide.

Today, there are 114 Dress for Success affiliates in 12 countries providing services to 50,000 women annually. Since its inception, the organization has served more than 550,000 women around the world by providing professional apparel and career development services, which include career guidance, technology skills acquisition, financial literacy and employment retention support.

Gordon explained the Dress for Success demographic has changed with the current economic conditions and rise in unemployment. Women who used to be suit donors are now clients seeking assistance. "It is an organization for all women," she stated. "We not only give suits, we give hope, dignity and confidence."

A typical week for Gordon includes at least two days of travel – domestic or international – to visit affiliates. During those visits, she gets to see and meet the clients of Dress for Success. These one-on-one meetings with the women, who have been referred by a variety of nonprofit and government agencies, reinforce Gordon's commitment to serving others and provide her with the benefit of continued personal growth.

Gordon told about a visit to Hamilton, New Zealand, where she "suited" a client referred to the local affiliate by a domestic violence shelter. After the selection of the suit, the woman said, "I have to ask you a favor." With some concern, Gordon asked the woman what she meant. "Do you think I could have a hanger?" the woman inquired. With this simple request, Gordon was reminded of the desperate conditions from which many Dress for Success clients have come and how proud she is to lead an organization that changes lives.

The remainder of Gordon's week is usually spent in a balancing act of various business meetings. With corporate support accounting for 85 percent of the organization's income, and in-kind new clothing donations coming from manufacturers and retailers representing 40 percent of inventory, Gordon is frequently interacting with corporate representatives.

Despite the time demands of her job, Gordon finds time for a personal life, which revolves around her husband, Errol, and their two children, 15-year-old daughter Sydney and 13-year-old son Nicholas. Errol operates Navigator Transportation Services, a luxury limousine service. The couple met when Gordon was in law school and traveled to New York City for the national convention of the National Black Law Students Association. While attending the convention, Gordon stayed with her cousin, who worked for Errol and introduced the two.



Joi Gordon helps a Dress for Success client select a suit.



Joi Gordon (center, in pink) rings the Closing Bell at the New York Stock Exchange.

In addition to providing the opportunity to meet her husband, Gordon credits her time at OU Law with increasing her self-confidence. Her service as president of the Black Law Students Association helped develop leadership skills, as did a term as general counsel of the University of Oklahoma Student Association and membership on the committee interviewing candidates for the position of law dean. "These roles kept pushing me forward," she commented. "I left law school with more than my degree. I was able to walk with confidence."

"I am incredibly fortunate to have a job that combines my commitment to public service with my passion for women's issues."

Gordon serves on the board of directors of America's Charities, a nonprofit leader in workplace giving, and on the advisory board of Project Single Moms-Atlanta. She was awarded the 2007 Ellis Island Medal of Honor and the 2009 Vice Chancellor's Award from The American Foundation for the University of West Indies. She was named by *Network Journal Magazine* as one of the 25 Most Influential Black Women in Business and was recognized in a 2007 cover story of

Black Enterprise magazine as an example of successful social entrepreneurship.

Gordon's career path took detours unforeseen by the young journalism student when she formulated her plan more than 20 years ago. As circumstances arose that caused her to revise that plan, she remained open to change without compromising her desire to serve others. "I am incredibly fortunate to have a job that combines my commitment to public service with my passion for women's issues," stated Gordon.

Speaking at the Women and Philanthropy Symposium at OU in November 2011, Gordon told the group that Dress for Success has changed her life forever. She sees herself as a cheerleader for the women the organizations serves. Her best advice to clients, she said, is to tell them she believes in them and it is now time for them to believe in themselves.

Gordon mentioned she had the opportunity to meet Muhammad Ali in 1992, and was thrilled when he told her she reminded him of his daughter. She concluded her keynote address with a famous Ali quote, "Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth." Joi Gordon is certainly paying her rent and has found success by helping others succeed – an uplifting story any television reporter would love to tell. | **SL** |