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Tried and true Attorney displays passion for fairness - and sports



By Debra Talcott

Legal News

Growing up in the 1960s and graduating from the University of Michigan in 1972, attorney Deborah Gordon could not escape having her life shaped by the tumultuous social changes of the era.

A trial lawyer who specializes in employment and civil rights law, Gordon served as Assistant Attorney General for the State of Michigan and Senior Trial Attorney for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) before entering private practice.

“When I was 12 years old, I watched the civil rights movement unfold in front of me on our television,” Gordon said. “I was stunned at the reality of race discrimination. I had huge admiration for all of the giants of the movement, even at that age, and I decided pretty much right then that one day I would do something having to do with civil rights.”

Gordon recalls her years on the University of Michigan campus as a continuation of her social awareness — while, at the same time, a chance to escape through her love of sports.

“I was there at an amazing time, with so much happening politically: Vietnam, civil rights, Nixon v. McGovern, the Black Action Movement (BAM) strike at U-M, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and the Ellsberg papers,” she said. “There was always a demonstration or a sit-in. At the same time, there was football. Bo Schembechler began his career at Michigan my sophomore year.”

Upon graduation, Gordon took her English degree and her teaching certificate and headed to Belleville High School (where she worked with Lloyd Carr, who would go on to coach at her alma mater).

Her goal of teaching high school students, however, was replaced by a new goal when a female friend announced that she had been admitted to law school.

“I had never known, personally, a woman who went to law school — and a new idea was planted,” Gordon said. “After one year of teaching, I went to University of Detroit School of Law. While in law school, I got a job clerking in the state Attorney General’s Office in the civil rights division, where I was hired after graduation. I worked for the indomitable Frank Kelley, a true public servant.”

Gordon was in Attorney General Kelley’s office when civil rights law was just developing, and she considers that experience an excellent opportunity to learn from the ground up.

“In addition,” she said. “we all took our turns representing the Secretary of State in driver’s restoration cases in Wayne County Circuit Court at Friday morning motion call. I learned a lot just sitting in court and then battling to keep people from getting their licenses back.”

From the Attorney General’s Office, Gordon went on to serve as a trial lawyer with the EEOC, when an opportunity for private practice was presented.

“Sheldon Stark, who had started a two-person firm, asked me to join him,” Gordons aid. “So I left a secure income for a more risky plaintiff’s contingency practice. That practice eventually became Stark and Gordon and then Deborah Gordon PLC. I love contingency fee work, selecting the cases I want to work on, and having the same goal as the client — maximizing the result in the most efficient way possible.”

With four attorneys in her practice, Gordon is proud of the work her firm does.

“Most recently I am proud of our \$3,000,000 verdict in *Wedrow v. Oakland County*,” she said. “We obtained verdicts against former prosecutor Dave Gorceyca and his second-in-command Deborah Carley for defamation and civil rights violations. I am also very proud of representing University of Michigan student Christopher Armstrong against Andrew Shirvell — an assistant attorney general who was stalking and harassing Chris because he was gay. We obtained a \$4,500,000 verdict.”

Gordon's office does its share of pro bono work, and her team represented Christopher Armstrong pro bono.

Another prominent pro bono case that her firm litigated was *Rick Sitz v. the State of Michigan* on behalf of the American Civil Liberties Union. This case helped put an end to drunk driving roadblock stops by the State Police on the basis that they are a violation of individual civil liberties.

In addition to providing pro bono legal services, one of Gordon's favorite organizations to help is Alternatives for Girls on West Grand Boulevard in Detroit.

The organization offers shelter to homeless and high-risk girls and young women. Mentors help them make positive life choices while avoiding violence, teen pregnancy, and exploitation.

Gordon is currently active in the Michigan Association for Justice, the Federal Bar Association, and the American College of Trial Lawyers.

She is a past president of the Labor & Employment Council of the State Bar of Michigan. An author and co-author of several publications, Gordon lectures on employment law and trial skills, and she has appeared on radio and television.

Her connection to the media comes naturally.

Gordon is the daughter of the late Lou Gordon, Detroit's prominent television and radio personality of the 1960s and '70s who made his fans think about and care about the issues he raised in his political interviews and with his question-and-answer format.

"My father gets 100 percent credit for anything I have done," she said. "I watched everything he did and how he did it. He was his own man and, as far as I can tell, was fearless. I loved watching his show. I developed my love of politics and sports from him."

Gordon said her father "would have been a great trial lawyer, but he had a fantastic career interviewing people on his show. He was self-made. He was raised in the Detroit Jewish community, and it was a wonderful backdrop to my childhood. I was raised in Huntington Woods, which was a perfect place to grow up."

Gordon is one of those women who seem to "have it all."

She is an accomplished professional, a wife, and a mother. Yet she makes time for the simple pleasures of gardening in the family's Birmingham yard, walking the dogs, reading, swimming and getting together with friends.

"My husband, Marc Thomas, is a tax controversy and business litigation attorney," Gordon said. "I have two daughters, both of whom are University of Michigan grads. Sarah is working at Teach for America in Chicago. Annie was with Teach for America and is now back in school in Boston. The girls are gone, but our German Shepherd and Corgi are home for dinner every night."

When she is not in her office or in court trying cases, Gordon often finds herself

engaged in some thoughtful reading.

“Give me The New York Times and lounge chair and I’m happy,” Gordon said. “I love reading and am currently in a book club. It’s a bunch of lawyers and a few judges, and we have a blast.”

She said she is “being introduced to things I would never have selected on my own.”

“I usually like history and nonfiction, and our club reads a lot of fiction,” Gordon said. “We recently finished ‘All the Light We Cannot See.’”

Gordon also has retained the passion for University of Michigan athletics that began when she was about 10 and was fostered by her father. He would, no doubt, be pleased that, like most Michigan fans, his daughter has a strong opinion about the new head football coach.

“I am amazed and thrilled that Jim Harbaugh is in Ann Arbor — it is almost too good to be true,” Gordon said. “I look forward to watching his career as a Michigan coach. He is just so impressive at every level — recruiting, development of players, leading, and strategy.”

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