

A photograph of a woman with dark hair, wearing a blue jacket, clapping her hands. She is looking upwards and to the left. The background is a warm, brownish color, possibly a wall or a stage. The text is overlaid on the lower half of the image.

*REMEMBERING the
POWER of WORDS*

The Life of an Oregon Activist, Legislator,
and Community Leader

Avel Louise Gordly with Patricia A. Schechter

Remembering the Power of Words

THE LIFE OF AN OREGON ACTIVIST,
LEGISLATOR, AND COMMUNITY LEADER

by

Avel Louise Gordly
with
Patricia A. Schechter

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

10	<i>Foreword</i> by Charlotte Rutherford
15	<i>Acknowledgements</i>
19	<i>Chapter One</i> Before We Become Dust
22	<i>Chapter Two</i> Our Day Will Come
30	<i>Chapter Three</i> “It is Better to Be Loved than Feared”
49	<i>Chapter Four</i> Them Changes
59	<i>Chapter Five</i> Operation Crossroads Africa
67	<i>Chapter Six</i> The Correcting Influence
80	<i>Chapter Seven</i> “She Who Learns, Teaches”
94	<i>Chapter Eight</i> Forward Together, Backward Never
105	<i>Chapter Nine</i> A Heart for Africa

117	<i>Chapter Ten</i> Hope and Hard Work
133	<i>Chapter Eleven</i> Growing and Stretching
161	<i>Post Script</i> “Don’t Forget Our People”
166	<i>Afterword</i> A Note on Collaboration and Method
171	<i>Bibliography</i>
173	<i>Index</i>

A list of bills introduced by Avel Gordly as a state legislator can be found at <http://hdl.handle.net/1957/19543>

Foreword

I have known Avel Gordly since we were third graders in a Portland public school. That would have been about 1955-56, shortly after passage of Oregon's Public Accommodations Act in 1953. The first page of this memoir shows Avel holding a photo of the members of the N.A.A.C.P. Portland Branch who lobbied for that Act and the legislators who sponsored it on the day the Act was passed. Members of the N.A.A.C.P. lobbied for eighteen legislative sessions—that's thirty-six years—before they succeeded in having a law passed that prohibited discrimination in public accommodations. Prior to the Act, African Americans were prohibited from most restaurants, hotels, swimming pools, amusement parks, and even hospitals. My parents Otto and Verdell Rutherford were leading the organization at the time the Act was passed and they are in the picture. I am honored that Avel has paid tribute to my parents and their comrades for their volunteer service and that she has asked me to write this foreword.

It is fitting that Avel has chosen to include this picture for a couple of reasons. First, the picture conveys Avel's feeling that she is standing on the shoulders of those who came before her and that she has carried the legacy of those early activists forward in her roles as activist, legislator, and educator.

Second, the picture shows the results of a collaborative effort. This memoir is also the result of collaboration between Avel and Patricia Schechter, her friend and colleague from Portland State University. Patricia interviewed Avel as a participant in an oral history project. The interview has evolved into this book—an opportunity for the reader to see the private face behind a public person.

Avel's public life is a matter of public record. For a complete professional biography, see <http://www.pdx.edu/blackstudies/avel-gordly-biography>. Briefly stated, Avel served in the Oregon State Legislature from 1991 to 2008. After serving three terms as

a member of the House of Representatives, Avel was elected as Oregon's first female African American State Senator in 1996. She retired from that position in 2008.

In addition to serving on various task forces and committees, during her tenure in office Avel was the chief petitioner for a constitutional amendment that removed racist language from the Oregon Constitution and for Oregon's minimum wage law. She also sponsored the Expanded Options Bill, which many educators and advocates believed was the singular educational achievement of the 2005 legislative session; the Oregon Legislative Assembly's Day of Acknowledgment, renouncing Oregon's legacy of institutional racism; and the first legislation in the nation to address the issue of children abducted by family members or others into whose care the children had been entrusted.

Among other legislation she sponsored were bills:

- proclaiming Juneteenth, June 19 of each year, the day on which slavery was abolished in Texas in 1865, as a day for celebration statewide of dignity and freedom of all citizens;

- creating the Governor's Environmental Justice Task Force, which requires state agencies and the governor to work on issues of environmental justice in Oregon;

- requiring every county police force to be trained in the use of appropriate deadly force;

- creating the statewide Office of Multicultural Health;

- requiring the availability of health care interpreters and the inclusion of people of diverse backgrounds on state health licensing boards.

Avel introduced resolutions honoring the lives, achievements, and heroism of Oregon citizens, including my parents, McKinley Burt, Bill McClendon, Ruth Ascher, Hon. Roosevelt Robinson, and Hon. Mercedes Deiz. Moreover, she organized a ceremony marking the fiftieth anniversary of the passage of the Public Accommodations Act, and honoring U.S. Senator Mark Hatfield, who carried the bill to passage as a young state legislator and is among those pictured in the photograph on the first page.

She also served on the Public Commission on the Legislature (appointed by Senate President) and the Mental Health Alignment Work group (appointed by Governor Kitzhaber).

Avel's personal story is one of faith and perseverance in the face of adversity, while dealing with clinical depression. Anyone who has battled depression while holding down a responsible position will identify with Avel's observations. Anyone who is faced with doubts about whether he or she is up to the challenge of single parenting or any single parent who wants more from life will gain strength from her story. Anyone who believes that social change is possible and that individuals can accomplish it will be encouraged by Avel's story. It is a story of self-creation, preparation, and taking advantage of opportunities when they presented themselves, even when faced with self-doubt. Avel has lived a life of service and she has blazed a trail of Black female "firsts." Her story includes her personal challenges and growth and how that growth has affected and improved the communities she has served. I urge teachers to use this book as an example of a local role model for youngsters.

Let me set the historical context for Avel's story. In 1940, there were fewer than two thousand African Americans in Portland (0.06 percent of the population). By 1950, the percentage had increased to 2.5 percent, still fewer than ten thousand African Americans in a total population of 374,000. Black people have always been true "minorities" in Portland. When Avel and I were young children, there were few Black professionals in Portland and job opportunities for Black people were mostly limited to service jobs.

Avel and I were both born in 1947 and grew up during a time of great change. We are old enough to remember "Old Portland" with its vibrant, mostly segregated Black community, largely situated near where the Coliseum now stands and with Black-owned businesses along Williams Avenue. (Avel and her siblings still own the family home on N. Williams Ave. and have succeeded thus far in avoiding the forces of gentrification.) We also remember having to sit in the balcony at segregated movie theaters and being able to skate at the

segregated roller rink on only one night a week. We were raised at a time when mothers stayed at home, or if they worked, most were domestics for white families because there were few jobs; and patriarchy was the norm.

Avel and I both come from traditional two-parent working-class families. Both of our fathers had worked for the railroad at one time and lived in Oregon at a time when the state constitution said “Negroes” could not be in the state. They actively fought against the discrimination and exclusion faced by African Americans. Our parents had high expectations of us and we had high expectations for ourselves. Our parents were our role models. We believed that everything we did reflected on our family and our race and we were obliged to do our best and not embarrass either.

By the time of our teens and early twenties, because of local and nationwide agitation and struggle that led to new laws, both African Americans and women had found their voices and America was forever changed. Even though there was much work yet to be done, new opportunities were being created. Being both Black and female, we were affected by both movements and our lives are the result of those times.

I always felt that I was under the microscope of the Black community when I was growing up. Most Black people knew each other and I was “Otto and Verdell’s girl.” I felt it was a burden to be the daughter of two people who were so well known. I just wanted to be “Charlotte,” so I kept leaving Portland, moving to Los Angeles right out of high school and eventually ending up at Howard University School of Law in Washington, D.C., during the unpleasant Reagan era.

After finishing law school, I worked as a civil rights attorney for the N.A.A.C.P. Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., in D.C. and New York City during a time when the courts were overturning much of the progress that had been made in the 1970s. It became clear to me that using traditional civil rights laws and the courts to expand opportunities to gain equity for African Americans had reached its

end. I returned to Oregon to assist my elderly parents and worked in the public sector as an administrative law judge until recently retiring.

Avel and I worked together in community organizations before I left for law school. During the period that I was away from Portland, Avel was elected to the state legislature. That role put her in a strong public light. I have watched in awe as Avel has opened her life to the public and made sometimes unpopular decisions based on her convictions and integrity—which is not the way the legislative game is usually played. She maintained her focus and was not swayed by the moneyed interests. She has sponsored meaningful legislation and ensured that the State of Oregon recognized Black Oregonians' contributions. And now that she has retired from the senate, she is continuing to serve the community by passing on her knowledge and insights to students at Portland State University.

Avel and I came of age at a time when things were improving for African Americans and for women. We were fortunate enough to be informed and influenced by the struggles of our parents to believe that we could make a difference and that we were obliged to try to do so regardless of the personal obstacles we may have faced. This book should be required reading for all who are interested in the history of Oregon's diverse public servants. Senator Avel Gordly has certainly been of great service to Oregonians in general, and African American Oregonians, in particular. She is deserving of accolades and tributes in honor of that service. I am proud and thankful that I can call her my sisterfriend.

Charlotte B. Rutherford
Portland, Oregon
August 15, 2010

Before We Become Dust

Growing up, finding my own voice was tied up with denying my voice or having it forcefully rejected and in all of that the memory of my father is very strong. To this day—and I am today a very experienced public speaker—preparation to speak takes a great deal of energy. A lot of the energy is dedicated to overcoming fear and the pain of injury previously inflicted on me for speaking up. Over the years, I have developed some sure ways to find my voice, catch my breath, and start to speak. Sometimes I think prayerfully of the names of my mother, Beatrice Bernice Gordly, and of my grandmothers, Alberta Louise Randolph and Lessie Gordly. Sometimes I say their names to myself, sometimes I speak them aloud. I say the names with thanks and gratitude to God. Saying their names always centers me. Sometimes I even start my remarks by dedicating my words to honor their memory. I also use word-for-word prepared texts for my speeches, not just notes or outlines. I have to write down every word to get through my fear.

Just recently at an Urban League dinner in town, Dr. Julianne Malveaux, the brilliant economist, gave a wonderful speech—without notes! I’ve loved listening to her for many years. I admire how she uses language, her comfort in her own skin, her way of storytelling, and her use of humor. As I acknowledge and affirm who she is, a little piece of *me* still feels “not good enough.” A tape recording in my head about being “not good enough” was violently enforced in my life over a period of many years. My story involves a struggle to quiet that tape and find my own voice in the world. Though we are both accomplished Black women and share certain perspectives and experiences, my voice is different from Dr. Malveaux’s. We have different, unique stories and selves, formed in different, unique circumstances. My circumstances took shape in Portland, Oregon, where I was born on February 13, 1947.

Many, many times during my childhood my mom, my sister Faye, and I would be at home glued to the television set watching something related to the Civil Rights Movement. In fact, any time a Black person was on television at all my mom would be on the phone calling someone to tune in and watch—or someone would be calling her—which speaks volumes about Black invisibility in the early 1960s. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., visited Vancouver Avenue Baptist Church in November 1961. My grandmother's copy of his book about the Montgomery Bus Boycott, *Stride Toward Freedom*, was signed in that church when he came to visit. I have this volume in my personal collection, a treasured memento of those historic years of hope and struggle.

A march held in Portland on September 22, 1963, brought the Civil Rights Movement even more directly home to me in Oregon. A wonderful high school teacher, Mr. Amasa Gilman, encouraged me and my friends to participate in this march, intended to protest the murder of the four little girls in church in Birmingham, Alabama. On that Sunday, we marched from Vancouver Avenue Baptist Church on the east side into downtown Portland and we massed in front of the federal courthouse. I have a strong memory of being present with my girlfriends Irma and Lela, my buddies. We were sisterfriends and traveled everywhere together. Many participants in the march spoke about their pain over the killings. It was painful for me to dwell on this outrage but it was also a relief. That march was a defining moment because it exposed me to people who spoke out in support of something of great importance—civil rights—and against something horrible—the murder of innocent children. Looking back, the event allowed me to link the issue of African American civil rights explicitly to horrendous violence against black girls. Something about that moment in time remains heavy for me to this day. Yet that march told me that I could have a voice, too, even as a young person.

The march evokes important memories of the power of words in my life. Words carry so much feeling, history, and meaning. Words carry the power to inspire; they can also inflict great pain. I always attend carefully to language because I want my words to mean what

I say. I'm keenly aware that words are not just sent, they are also received, yet the speaker can only control the first part, the sending. In my life, all too often the right word from me did not bring the desired response. I remember an assignment in high school—it may have been a crossword puzzle—requiring us to identify names of famous people. One name was that of the well-known film director Elia Kazan. I knew the name because I was a reader and the name was just there for me. When I spoke out the answer in class, the teacher looked at me and asked: “How do you know that?” I felt like I had been struck because his words meant: “You are not supposed to know that.” Many years later a white female colleague in the legislature would say to me with surprise, after hearing me speak: “You sound smart!” A boundary between knowledge and speech had been transgressed and this teacher reprimanded me for assuming the power to cross it.

At school, knowing the right word and speaking it often elicited racist hostility. At home, I faced another set of challenges related to speaking up. Talking back, especially to my father, was strictly forbidden. My dad let my sister and me know that we were not to question him or ask “Why?” about anything. When he spoke, that was The Law. A defining moment of enforcing this Law took place in the kitchen, when I was a teenager. My mom was fixing dinner and she and my dad were talking. I was sitting in a chair; somehow I was part of the conversation and asked the question “Why?” The next thing I knew I was picking myself up from the floor. My father had struck me across the face so hard that I literally saw stars. That punishment was for asking the question “Why?”

It is a gift to look back and unpack everything in between then and now and reflect aloud. How many of us get to do that before we become dust?

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“If you ever wondered how a principled woman lives a public life, read *Remembering the Power of Words*! Here Avel Gordly reveals the challenges, victories, and fears of her life of public service—in the Oregon legislature and senate, especially. Writing as a black female pioneer, she combines the personal with the political in a fascinating way that speaks to all of us.”

NELL IRVIN PAINTER, Edwards Professor of American History, Emerita, Princeton University and author of *The History of White People* and *Sojourner Truth, A Life, A Symbol*

Remembering the Power of Words recounts the personal and professional journey of Avel Gordly, the first African American woman elected to the Oregon State Senate.

In a brave and honest telling, Gordly shares the challenges and struggles she faced growing up Black in Portland in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as her determination to attend college, the dedication to activism that took her from Portland to Africa, and her eventual decision to run for a seat in the state legislature.

That words have power is a constant undercurrent in Gordly’s account and a truth she learned early in life. “Growing up, finding my own voice,” she writes, “was tied up with denying my voice or having it forcefully rejected and in all of that the memory of my father is very strong. To this day—and I am today a very experienced public speaker—preparation to speak takes a great deal of energy.” That this memoir has its origins as an oral history is fitting since Gordly has used her voice, out loud, to teach and inspire others for many years.

AVEL LOUISE GORDLY has received numerous awards and honors for her work as a legislator and community organizer on behalf of many organizations, including the Black United Front, Portlanders Organized for Southern African Freedom, the American Friends Service Committee, the Urban League of Portland, and the House of Umoja. She is Associate Professor in the Black Studies Department at Portland State University.

PATRICIA A. SCHECHTER is Associate Professor of History at Portland State University. She is the author of *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform, 1880-1930* and a series of public history projects on Oregon women’s history.

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