Avel Gordly (1947-)

In 1996, Avel Louise Gordly became the first African American woman elected to the Oregon State Senate. Gordly was born in Portland on February 13, 1947. Her father, Faye Gordly, was a railroad worker active with the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Maids; her mother, Beatrice Bernice Randolph, was a long-time member of Mt. Olivet Baptist church and a Grand Worthy Matron of the Eastern Star.

Gordly graduated from Girls Polytechnic High School in 1965 and worked at Pacific Northwest Bell until 1970. That year, she enrolled at Portland State University, where she earned a degree in the administration of justice. After graduation, she worked for the Oregon Corrections Division as a women's work-release counselor and later as an adult parole and probation officer.

A key activist affiliation for Gordly was the Black United Front (BUF). A national civil rights group headquartered in Chicago, Portland's dynamic BUF was founded in 1979 by a core group of black activists, including Ronald Herndon and Reverend John Jackson. In addition to handling media work for the group, Gordly coordinated the Front's Saturday School, whose African American history program was tied to curriculum reform in the public education system. With the Front's spin-off, Portlanders Organized for Southern African Freedom, and in concert with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), Gordly helped score key anti-apartheid victories in the 1980s, including the resignation of the South African consul from his Portland office and divestiture legislation in Salem.

In 1979, Gordly redirected her professional energy through the Urban League of Portland as director of youth services and head of its Youth Service Center. In 1983, AFSC hired her to lead their Southern Africa Program, which was focused on anti-apartheid and refugee relief, and she made national headlines when she was promoted to regional director. Gordly was resident coordinator of a safe-haven program for youth at the House of Umoja in northeast Portland when she was tapped to fill a vacancy created by a retirement in the legislature in 1991. The call came from the community. Political activist Thalia Zepatos' initial encouragement was soon supported by activists, leaders, friends, and allies who were eager for Gordly to serve.

Gordly was subsequently elected state representative from north and northeast Portland in 1992. Her legislative record includes an array of initiatives that focus on cultural competency in education, mental health, and criminal justice. In addition to committee assignments such as Joint Ways and Means, Trade and Economic Development, and Environmental Quality, Gordly was co-chair on Governor John Kitzhaber's Task Force on Racial and Ethnic Health and served on the Public Commission on the Oregon Legislature. She also achieved notable reform in the Senate caucus system and briefly secured press access for meetings that were usually closed. She has traveled in sixteen African nations and, in 1997, led a trade delegation to South Africa and Zambia.

Gordly has received awards from groups such as the YWCA, the NAACP, the Oregon Youth Authority, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, the Girl Scouts, and the Oregon Commission for Women. In 2008, OHSU opened the Avel Gordly Center for Healing, dedicated to multicultural mental health and psychiatric services.

Written by Patricia Schechter

Further Reading:

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McLagan, Elizabeth. *A Peculiar Paradise: Blacks in Oregon, 1788-1940.* Portland, Ore.: Georgian Press, 1980.

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