

# 'right fit'

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## FOR DC'S EIGHTEENTH PRESIDENT

*The more information Mark C. Gordon found about Defiance College, the more excited he became*

*by Kathy PUNCHES '96, Director of Public Relations and Marketing*

A plane ride to Maine with his infant son turned out to be a life-changing event for Mark Gordon.

As Defiance College's new president recounts the story, he was taking baby Charlie to Maine so that his grandmother could see her newest great-grandchild. "I apologized to the woman next to me on the plane that she

got stuck sitting next to the guy with the baby on his lap," Gordon recalls. The travelers began chatting. "By the end of the plane ride, she said to me, 'I'm from a public policy school in Maine, and we are looking for a dean. You should apply to be dean of our school.'"

That was in 2000, and Gordon was working as an associate professor on the faculty at Columbia University. He had been teaching in the School of International and

Public Affairs and was director of the Urban Habitat Project, a program that examined innovative approaches to urbanization around the world.

Gordon's career to that point had included six years on the faculty at Columbia preceded by a position with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Before graduating from Harvard Law School and working in a New York law firm, he had been Assistant to the



Secretary for New York Governor Mario Cuomo.

Gordon enjoyed public policy, whether teaching or implementing, and he was intrigued with the idea of being the dean of a public policy school. He applied, and while he didn't get the job, it whetted his appetite, and he began applying to a handful of schools that interested him. That led him to the position of dean at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law.

"That was a great experience," he recalls of his UDM tenure. He and his wife, Anne, and sons, Chris and Charlie, were in Detroit for nearly seven years. "Anne and the boys loved it as well, so we were only going to leave for a really special place with a special opportunity, which is what Defiance is."

While he didn't officially take office at Defiance College until July 1, Gordon had already immersed himself in all things DC when board chairman Phil Mallott announced the new president in mid-February.

"Anne came to see Defiance before I did, because I wasn't going to seriously consider any place where she wouldn't be happy," Gordon says. "And so nobody knew that she was here, but she came and looked around and went through the downtown and came back to me and said that we could be happy there."

On a January day before his initial interview with the search committee in Columbus, Gordon drove first to Defiance where, in a heavy snowstorm, he made an anonymous visit to campus. "I felt like a dummy. I kept driving through the snow, and the place was deserted, but I was able to get into different buildings. I was concerned that security would see me and think I was trying to break in or something, which would have been a heck of an introduction."

He met the following day with the search committee. "I just had a blast talking to them," he says. "Anne will tell you that as I was reading the background about Defiance, I looked at a series of other schools. But as I was reading about Defiance, she could see

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"I was very taken by the McMaster School and everything we've done with that, and the service learning, the engagement, the innovative programs, the close faculty relations with students, caring about students, and the real sense of community. So I just felt we had a whole bunch of passions in common. And then I was even more impressed by the potential."

## GROWING UP

Mark Gordon grew up far from rural northwest Ohio, but his early experiences made great preparation for the opportunities and challenges that now greet him as a college president.

He grew up as the middle child of three in White Plains, N.Y., a suburb of New York City. As a kid, he wanted to be a veterinarian. He loved animals, witnessed by his family's two dogs, three cats, and multiple fish tanks.

When Gordon was a youngster, his family began month-long summer trips to Europe, which as he recalls "was a great way to open my eyes." As a six-year-old, he visited Greece, Turkey, Paris and Belgium, to be followed

by trips all across Europe.

But the experiences that he found to be the most formative began when he was 13 when he started living with foreign families through the Experiment in International Living, an established program that offers summer abroad experiences focusing on cultural immersion to foster peace through understanding, communication and cooperation.

In the summer of 1974 he spent three weeks in intensive language training ("You don't get a lot in three weeks," he laughs.) and then lived with a family in Mexico for three weeks. The following summer, he lived for a month with a Costa Rican family where he attended school with his Costa Rican brother Juan Carlos.

"I have four Costa Rican brothers, and I just visited them a couple of years ago. ... The baby brother is now the mayor of the town," says Gordon.

At 15, he traveled with his high school German class to live with a family in Germany for a month. Gordon remains close to his German and Costa Rican families and was last in Germany two years ago for his German mother's 80th birthday.

As a teen, Gordon also spent a summer living on a dairy farm in Oregon. "I loved it. I learned how to milk cows. We'd get up every morning and move the irrigation pipe in the fields."

When it was time to go to college, Gordon followed the path to Columbia University set by his parents. His father holds bachelor's and law degrees from Columbia. His mother earned her bachelor's degree from Barnard, which is part of Columbia. She went on to receive an MBA and a social work degree from Columbia.

Gordon's sister, Louise, graduated from Barnard, earned a law degree and now lives in Oxford, England. His younger brother, Stephen, an emergency room pediatrician in New York, earned his undergraduate degree at Columbia.

As a college freshman, Gordon was fascinated with a course he took in international politics, and so he pursued studies in domestic and international politics, earning a master's degree in international affairs and a certificate from the Russian Institute.



And it was at Columbia during the 1978-79 academic year, that Gordon as a young sophomore met Anne Zweibel, a freshman engineering student. He recalls the floor party where they first met. Each suite had to prepare food for the party.

“So, of course, the guys’ suite left it until the last minute, and we ended up making a fruit salad using one of my suitemate’s chemistry beakers to mix it, so we didn’t touch it. Anne had made this delicious chocolate roll. I was amazed that anybody could have made that, and I went back for seconds.”

Anne wrote to her mother that there was one suite of young men “which was not so bad.”

He easily remembers their first date - Feb. 9, 1979 - “Aida” at the Metropolitan Opera.

### **PUBLIC POLICY FIRST-HAND**

A college internship for then-lieutenant governor of New York Mario Cuomo became a pivotal experience for Gordon. “Everybody was convinced he had absolutely no political

future,” Gordon remembers. He went on to work on Cuomo’s gubernatorial campaign in 1982. When Cuomo won, he invited Gordon to work for him in Albany. For the first year he worked in the press office as an assistant to the counselor (press secretary) Tim Russert, who went on to become acclaimed NBC bureau chief and “Meet the Press” moderator.

Gordon spent nearly five years in Albany with Cuomo and found him to be an excellent mentor. “I was in my mid-20s and what a wonderful experience with great exposure, seeing the way Mario Cuomo thought about issues and would argue about different issues. I think it’s really because of him that I decided to go to law school because I saw the way he used his legal training to think through public policy issues.”

Gordon hadn’t planned on being an attorney but decided he wanted to get the training that Cuomo used so skillfully. “I saw the way he called me into the office and would ask me what I thought about something, and whatever position I took he’d totally demolish me. And then if somebody else came in and took the position that he

was arguing, he’d switch sides and demolish them. At first I thought, ‘Is he just trying to prove that he’s smarter than we are?’ but then I realized that that was how he thought through public policy issues. He would argue all different sides until he was convinced that he had thought through which side was the strongest.”

After helping Cuomo win re-election in 1986, Gordon entered Harvard Law School. “You talk to a lot of people, and they don’t like law school,” he says. “I thought it was great. I loved thinking about all the different legal issues. I loved spending time discussing them back and forth with my classmates.”

In 1990, Gordon married Anne, who had earned engineering and master’s degrees from Columbia. She had joined a firm as a structural engineer, designing and rehabbing bridges. “It’s always amazed me that she actually knows how those bridges stand up, especially since I am a total klutz around the house,” he says.

With a Harvard law degree in hand, Gordon began working at the international law firm Hughes Hubbard and Reed. The newlywed law associate arranged that he

would work for six months, then take a six months' leave of absence so that he and Anne could travel around the world. "And so those first six months, we lived off Anne's salary and saved mine. And then we used it to travel around the world."

He recalls the trip as a phenomenal experience. To enhance the experience and even sometimes make extra money, Gordon gave lectures in various countries and spoke with a series of groups and universities in New Zealand, Australia, and Brunei. The U.S. Information Agency sponsored him in Kuala Lumpur, where he lectured on U.S. nuclear policy in front of 40 colonels and lieutenant colonels at the Malaysian Armed Forces Defense College. He was able to secure speaking invitations because he had been a teaching fellow at Harvard in the College and the Kennedy School of Government.

The newlyweds' global trek included taking a jeep across Tibet, spending a week in Ulan Bator, Mongolia, and riding across Russia on the Trans-Siberian Railroad.

The six months passed quickly, and Gordon returned to his law firm. In late November of 1992, he received a message to call Andrew Cuomo, someone he had come to know well during his years with the governor. Andrew Cuomo asked Gordon to serve as a consultant on the Clinton presidential transition team writing the transition report for the Department of Housing and Urban Development. That two-week project turned into an appointment as Chief of Staff to Cuomo who was named Assistant Secretary at HUD.

For the next three-and-a-half years, Gordon spent his week days in Washington, flying back to New York on weekends. During his time at HUD, he served as Chief of Staff for an office that oversaw more than \$7 billion of federal homeless, housing, community and economic development programs. He played a significant role in developing and administering Clinton's Empowerment Zones initiative and in the creation of a new \$350 million Economic Development initiative.

After one term, the young couple decided to start a family, and so Gordon left HUD for a teaching position in the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia. He started the job in August of 1996 and nine months later, son Chris was born. Charlie followed in the spring of 1999. Gordon was able to arrange his teaching schedule so that Anne could work two days a week while he took care of their sons.

## HEADING WEST

When Gordon and baby Charlie encountered the University of Southern Maine administrator on their 2000 plane ride, the Columbia professor had already demonstrated that he was up for new and challenging adventures and opportunities.

His time as dean at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law was successful and rewarding. He recalls it as "a really happy seven years."

At UDM, Gordon developed and implemented nationally recognized public service programs, a distinctive international approach, and curricular innovations focused on success in getting jobs for its students. Enrollment in the law school nearly doubled. The school's successes drew national attention.

"I'm particularly proud of the expansion of the clinical programs, proud of getting our students jobs at major national law firms, and particularly proud of Project SALUTE, the clinic that we set up to help veterans from an RV. It's still going, still on the road providing free legal services for veterans," Gordon says.

When he left UDM for Defiance, Gordon asked for one thing to take with him - a U.S. flag that had flown over a U.S. air base in Iraq in honor of Gordon and Project SALUTE. The flag was presented to him on the 50-yard line at Ford Field during a Lions-Vikings game last December. He displays it proudly in his office in Defiance Hall.

## FROM DETROIT TO DEFIANCE

While there are similarities in leading a law school and an undergraduate college, Gordon also sees them as different animals. "When I was dean of the law school, the vast majority of people I spoke to in a given day were attorneys, and now I get to talk to not just lawyers but also all kinds of other interesting people who have had these fascinating lives across a whole series of areas. ...

"And, of course, Detroit is different from Defiance. I think the college here is so much more a prominent part of the community than the law school in Detroit. And the students, they're delightful. I've had so much fun getting to know them. They're just an interesting group of really solid young adults."

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He finds personal reward in helping to shape young students. "When students are college-age, you can have an even greater impact on helping them shape their lives and discover who they are and the kind of people that they want to be. They're in a period in their lives where they are growing intellectually by leaps and bounds.

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During his inaugural address on October 8, Gordon enumerated what he sees as the intrinsic value of a Defiance College education. (see page 6) And he spoke about his motivation to safeguard the mission of educational opportunity in this country. He told a very personal story of his now-deceased mother who, as a young girl in Germany in the 1930s, stood alone on the playground while the other children shunned her because she was Jewish. Her family was lucky enough to escape, as was his father's family which had fled the early nineteenth century pogroms of Eastern Europe, but it ingrained in them the importance of education. "In a world in which everything you own can be taken from you, what you possess inside your head and your heart remains with you still," spoke Gordon.

"The very fact that I can stand before you today as the new President of Defiance College says something wonderful about education and our country. And the fact that Defiance College would choose as its new President - a Jewish fellow married to a Lutheran woman, who was Dean of a Catholic law school and is now President of a UCC college - well, that says something wonderful about Defiance College as well. When we at Defiance draw the circle of opportunity, we aim to include as many as we can." ♦