

Gerald L. Gordon, PhD

A Future for the Making

Gerald Gordon's parents were soft spoken people who much preferred a quiet night at home with family to going out to dinner or a party. His mother's parents had immigrated to America from Poland, while his father's parents had moved from Russia and Germany, all as part of the great immigration wave of the 1890s when they were teenagers. They settled in New York City and found jobs where they could, working hard in the hopes that their children—Jerry's mother and father—could have a good education and a better life than they had.

But those children would have a formidable hurdle to overcome when the country was plunged into the Great Depression of the 1930s. Decades later, as an eighth grade civics student, Jerry asked his parents about the experience—a school assignment that would open his eyes to how hard things can be. "My father was seventeen when the stock market crashed in 1929," he recalls today. "He dropped out of high school to take a job in the Works Project Administration to support his father, mother, and twelve-year-old brother, working the graveyard shift at the Manhattan post office and cleaning hospital walls in the Bronx. And my mother told me about how her family lived for several years without any income whatsoever, sharing whatever food came their way by the kindness of others. I started gaining a new appreciation for what my parents and grandparents went through to make the future into something better."

Now the President and CEO of the Fairfax County Economic Development Authority (FCEDA), Jerry has dedicated his career to making the future better for the communities of Fairfax County through the careful curation of its tax base and prosperity. It's the kind of work that takes vision that's global in scope, paired with passion for local potential. And it's the kind of work that better the lives of families with histories all their

own, but which aren't so very different from branches of his own family tree. "Through the work of a collaborative, brilliant team, our mission is ultimately to create a better quality of life for those around us," he says. "Our county school system has more children living below the poverty level than there are children in all of DC. The work we do touches all those families, rich and poor, so that all kids can start out with a fighting chance in life."

At its essence, FCEDA's mission is to help provide the revenues that create the best quality of life possible for its residents, including the best school system in America, the safest neighborhoods in any large jurisdiction of the country, quality libraries and parks, and diverse communities. By creating jobs and generating wealth through the stimulation of a demand for the new commercial construction that contributes to the tax base, it enables the Board of Supervisors to provide these high quality public services.

"We're very mission-driven, and in our work to create the best community possible in Fairfax County, globally-focused," Jerry affirms. With an annual budget of \$7.7 million and a staff of 54 people, the FCEDA is the largest EDA in the country and has offices in Bangalore, London, Los Angeles, Berlin, Seoul, and Tel Aviv, all focused on attracting global businesses into the county's regional market.

The FCEDA first focused on its current mission in 1976, when the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors identified business growth as the key that would allow the county to scale their service offerings to meet the dramatic influx of new residents projected over the next fourteen years, without sacrificing the quality of life that made the county so special. The population of 455,000 residents was forecasted to jump to 800,000 by 1990, which meant they'd need more schools,



roads, law enforcement, firefighters, and libraries. Diversity was also expected to increase, which meant higher costs of delivering services to accommodate non-English speakers. "For every tax dollar paid by an individual, it cost the county around \$1.60 in public services," Jerry explains. "But for every tax dollar paid by a business, it cost the county only about 35 or 40 cents in public services. So it was important to accumulate those business tax dollars to offset the cost of public services for residents."

Jerry came to FCEDA from the Arlington County government in December of 1983, and stepped into the President and CEO role about a year and a half later. "Arlington County was trying to contain its growth, while Fairfax County was like the Wild West, where all the excitement was," he reflects. "They had a lot of folks doing the up-front work of deal making, and they needed a planner—someone to keep the place running properly and to close the deals when the time came."

As President and CEO, Jerry interfaces with state government, business executives, press, and the Board of Supervisors. Around 2001, he led the organization in a focus to spur the local economy through diversification, looking beyond the government contracting focus of the region to attract businesses like Volkswagen North America, Hilton, Capital One, and Bechtel. Thanks to this effort, Fairfax County is now the second largest suburban office market in the U.S., with its 600,000 jobs rivaling the employment generation capacity of nearby DC which has around 615,000 jobs. It is also incredibly diverse, with more nationalities represented in its public school system than there are countries represented in the United Nations. "While our diversity speaks to our strength, it also implies increased costs for delivering public services," Jerry acknowledges. "And, similar to the growth projected in the 1970s, we're expected to grow from 1.2 million residents to perhaps as many as 1.5 million in the future. We'll need new businesses to come into the area to help support that growth."

Jerry sees the county's future growth potential revolving around IT and the way it intersects with virtually all other disciplines, particularly in the area of cyber security. All of the region's existing businesses will need data analytics and cloud computing support, and the advent of translational medicine will also be

important, with Inova Health System planning to launch a Center for Personalized Health nearby. "We have a lot of construction going on right now, and a lot of vacant office space because it's taking companies longer than usual to make decisions," he explains. "Part of that is the economy. Part of it is uncertainty about federal contracting, and the slowdown spurred by the presidential election as the Obama administration wraps up. But the future is there for the making, and we're going to make sure Fairfax County continues to set itself apart as a world-class place to live, work, and do business."

With his eyes to the horizon, Jerry also draws much of his motivation and focus from reflecting on the past. Since his college years, he has carefully chronicled his family's genealogy and story—how his paternal grandmother was one of thirteen children, the second youngest of whom was born in the steering compartment of the ship that brought them to America. Many of those children joined the military during the first World War, and one of them—great-uncle Bob—received a certificate of gratitude signed by Woodrow Wilson after a piece of shrapnel embedded itself in his skull during the Battle of Belleau Wood. "It's important to me to know where my family came from—what it was like in the old country and how they assimilated here," Jerry says. "My life is defined by the spirit they had in confronting incredible challenges, with my grandparents as first generation immigrants dedicating their lives to risk and hard work. Everyone down the line has a better life because of them."

Education was always highlighted as an immigrant family's path to a better life, and though he had to drop out of high school during the Great Depression, Jerry's father earned his GED-equivalent and a degree in Architecture later in life. His mother was able to enroll in the City College of New York thanks to funding provided by a great aunt, and while most women at that time were content to pursue degrees in teaching or secretarial science, she wanted to be able to study engineering if that was her choice. Unfortunately, the death of her great aunt and the outbreak of World War II interrupted her coursework, and she married Jerry's father in September of 1940. She later returned to her studies and earned both a Bachelors and a Masters degree.

The young family moved to the DC metropolitan area and had three children, with

Jerry the middle child between, an older brother and a younger sister. Anti-Semitism was rampant, and his parents decided to change their name from Goldstein to Gordon in an effort to hide their Jewish heritage. "I still vividly remember my mother sending me off to kindergarten when I was five years old, instructing me that under no circumstance was I to tell anyone that I was Jewish," he reflects. "When I asked why, she told me it was because there were people who would want to hurt me and the rest of the family. I decided I never wanted to be the kind of person who makes someone feel so uncomfortable that they can't admit to who or what they are."

It was a feeling that was reinforced one Saturday morning not long after, when Jerry and his brother rode the trolley car to the YMCA for swim lessons as they did every Saturday. An elderly woman juggling two bags of groceries stepped on, and Jerry hopped up to give her his seat. But the woman just smiled at him as she walked to the back of the trolley car, where the other African Americans were sitting. "It struck me that blacks had to sit at the back of the bus because race wasn't something we were taught to see at that young age," he reflects.

As a kid, Jerry loved baseball and would play with the other neighborhood children in a vacant lot nearby. His parents couldn't afford to buy him a baseball glove, but when a friend got a new glove as a gift, he gave his old one to Jerry. "It became my prized possession," he laughs now. "I kept it until my hand was bigger than the glove." Jerry also enjoyed summers spent with his paternal grandparents—particularly his grandfather, Louis, who inspired his love of baseball and always wore suspenders while smoking a long cigar.

When he was young, the family moved to Prince George's County in search of a better school system. Still, Jerry's new school left much to be desired. "On my second grade report card, my teacher wrote, 'Jerry needs to learn he does not know more than the teacher,'" he recounts. "My mother confronted me with the report, and I replied, 'I beg to differ.' When I was in high school, we moved to Rockville, Maryland, where the schools were much better. The difference was night and day."

Jerry played baseball and basketball, and earned his Eagle Scout award when he was fifteen. He had never put much effort, if any, into school, but his parents never gave up on him and

constantly urged him to apply himself. Their efforts finally paid off when he decided to buckle down in tenth grade, setting his sights on getting in to a good college. "My dream at that point was to play short stop for the Yankees," he says. "I was missing just one thing—talent. So I decided that instead, I wanted to fly."

When he graduated from high school in 1968, Jerry enrolled at the Citadel, a military college known for its rigorous physical regimen, with plans to become a pilot. He can still remember vividly the time his squad-sergeant grabbed his weapon and slammed it against him out of frustration, separating his shoulder. As he laid on the ground, Jerry wondered for a moment why he had come to this place, but then looked up at the squad sergeant. "I decided that if that jerk could get through it, I could get through it," he recalls. "It was a defining moment for me where I learned that you can get through a lot of things you don't think you can get through, if you're determined."

Jerry made it through that first year, weathering a physically and psychologically draining system that was, in part, designed to ensure cadets could survive the camps in Vietnam. He was sent to navigator school, but by the time he graduated in April of 1972 as fifth in his departmental class, the war was winding down. He moved back home to the DC metropolitan area with Barbara, a young woman he had met while she was a student at the College of Charleston, and the two married that year.

America was facing double-digit unemployment and inflation at the time, and any job was a good job, so Jerry was grateful to land a position at the U.S. Department of Labor. He enrolled in night school at George Washington University to study economics—a discipline he quickly fell in love with and found so interesting that he got his PhD from Catholic University after completing his master's degree. He also took a job with Arlington County, where he took over management of their fourteen state and federal grants. He was able to lend new order and accountability to the management and use of the funds, setting himself apart as someone who could get things done.

It was one of the traits that caught the eye of Fairfax County, where he's now spent several decades leading the FCEDA to new heights. In 2010, he was honored by *Virginia Business Magazine*

as their Virginia Business Person of the Year for his important impact on the business community – the only time the award has been given to a non-business person. In that same year, he received the Virginia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Bridge Builder Award for his work to forge connections between the region’s racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural groups. “That recognition means a lot to me because many of the children in those diverse communities are growing up in immigrant families,” he points out. “I see similarities to my own family’s immigration story.” More than any other recognition, Jerry is most especially honored to be named the 2010 Virginia Business Person of the Year by *Virginia Business Magazine* – the only time a person other than a business person has been so recognized.

Jerry has also received the Israel Freedom Award from the Israel Bonds organization and the 2011 Northern Virginia Regional Leadership Award from Leadership Fairfax Inc, among a number of other honors. He received a Fulbright scholarship award to study and recommend paths for economic development in northern Scotland following the decommissioning of the area’s main source of employment, a nuclear power station. He has consulted for the United Nations, assisting former Soviet-bloc states with the transition from communism to capitalism. He has also taught as an adjunct professor at George Mason University, Virginia Commonwealth University, the University of Maryland, and Catholic University, loving the exchange of being in a classroom setting. He is the author of twelve books on economic development and strategic planning, several of which have been translated into Polish and Romanian.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Jerry reflects back with gratitude on the quality time he got to spend with his own sons, Brian and Danny, as they were growing up. He remembers the thoughtfulness with which they poured through a United Way

booklet he gave them when they were kids, letting them choose how his philanthropic paycheck deduction would be spent. “The boys ultimately decided to give to an orphanage to help children who didn’t have the blessings they had,” Jerry recounts. “We received a handwritten thank-you note from the children, and it was so meaningful that we’ve given to them year after year. It’s important to pursue things in life that are meaningful to you, whether it’s a career or a way of giving back.”

Beyond that, Jerry emphasizes leadership as the kind of trait that, like the future economic prosperity of a region, must be carefully cultivated and nurtured. “Leadership is not something that’s given to you,” he affirms. “You can be promoted into a leadership position, but that doesn’t make you a leader. You have to earn it.” Like his parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents before him, he continues to apply his own leadership in the service of generations to come, honoring the past and the present by remembering that the future is for the making.

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President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon’s Blog](#).