

Claudia Gordon: Barriers to inclusion

Meet **Claudia Gordon**, the first black, Deaf female lawyer in the United States. In this video, she encourages a perspective shift about what disabled people can achieve and calls upon philanthropy to play a role in amplifying the issues and needs of the disability community.

Transcript begins.

[piano music]

[Students dressed in caps and gowns, along with their families, fill a large stadium at the graduation ceremony for Eleanor Roosevelt High School, a public school in Maryland. Claudia Gordon, a tall black woman with short blonde hair, wearing a black graduation gown, walks up to the stage and starts the commencement address in American Sign Language. It is simultaneously interpreted into spoken English.]

CLAUDIA GORDON: Let's start with a round of applause.

[audience applauds]

[Gordon raises both her hands, all fingers extended, and rotates her wrists rapidly.]

GORDON: This is how we clap in sign language. It's a visual version of applause.

It is truly an honor for me to stand here today as your commencement speaker. Thank you so much for extending this invitation and the honor.

[The audience stands, claps their hands, and signs applause.]

GORDON: As you embark onto your next chapter, I also do not doubt many of you will find yourselves constantly forced to master spaces where you rightfully belong but to which you're going to be made to feel unwelcome because of one or more of your intersectional identities.

Suddenly losing one's ability to hear would have a dramatic effect on anyone, and it happened to me at the tender age of eight, in the country of my birth, Jamaica, West Indies. I knew that I was the same person I was prior to my sudden deafness, but the world around me viewed me differently.

[inspirational piano music]

[Footage of Gordon working at the computer and reading briefs in her office.]

VOICE-OVER [interview with Gordon interpreted into spoken English]: I'm a female attorney, and I've been able to work in different facets with the US government. I'm currently with the Sprint Corporation, working in the accessibility division.

When I was going to law school, there were people who looked at me as a black, Deaf woman and thought that it would be impossible for me to become a lawyer. Thankfully, there were a few people around me who said, "You can."

So we have to start removing that doubt from the minds of people, that disability is a barrier to achieving your goal and becoming successful, because we all have different abilities.

Philanthropy can have a broad reach to educate the wider population and elevate the concerns, needs, and issues, and to talk about the barriers that people with disabilities face on a daily basis.

[Footage of Gordon onstage delivering the commencement address.]

GORDON: Be uniquely you. Own your identity and power. Race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, national origin, and so on. One of these identities does not mean more or less than another one, but often society asks us to tick boxes, to define ourselves.

[Footage of the graduates receiving their diplomas from the school principal, then shaking Gordon's hand before they leave the stage.]

VOICE-OVER [interview with Gordon interpreted into spoken English]: Young people with disabilities face so many barriers, so I think it's important that we empower and equip them and have them understand their rights, surround them with mentors who can help them to achieve their potential and not limit themselves.

[Return to footage of Gordon onstage as she delivers the final lines of her address.]

GORDON: I am just one example of what is possible for many people like myself. If I have overcome anything, it was, and continues to be, the barriers that society throws in my path.

[The audience applauds, both by putting their hands together and in American Sign Language.]

VOICE-OVER: Where are you in your Journey to Inclusion? For more information, go to [DisabilityPhilanthropy.org](https://www.DisabilityPhilanthropy.org), and promote using the hashtag DisabilityInclusion. Brought to you by the Presidents' Council on Disability Inclusion in Philanthropy.

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