

## BEDC is proud to commission Nadia Laws, Media Maven CEO, to draft this first special Dr. Jessica Gordon-Nembhard interview.

Born into a family of scholar activists, it was normal for Jessica Gordon-Nembhard to sit across the dinner table from social and civil rights activists.

Her parents were both professionals and academics - her mother a practicing pediatrician and associate professor at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons. Meanwhile, her father was a developmental and educational psychologist and full professor who held endowed chairs at Columbia Teachers College and later Yale University. "They were both involved in the civil rights movement, the women's rights movement, and anti war movements," Dr Gordon-Nembhard explained. "They held leadership positions of local civil rights organizations and were community leaders, who would regularly take us to meetings and demonstrations.

"They also supported us when we were involved in our own school activities to reduce racial inequality or gender inequality. They had activists to dinner at our home and included us children at the dinner table for the discussions."

It was therefore no surprise when Dr Gordon-Nembhard decided to focus her professional career on creating greater justice and economic development for the African American community. The political economist will be



on the Island on Saturday, March 30, sharing examples from her research on how communities can work together to build wealth and create more opportunities for advancement through cooperative economics.

Taking place at St Paul's Centennial Hall in the City of Hamilton, Dr Gordon-Nembhard will discuss

the benefits and impacts that a cooperative system can have on its members and their communities.

"We will explore why a place, such as Bermuda, might want to

increase the number of cooperatives and also look at the types of economic cooperation, which are possible to engage in," she said. "I'm hopeful there will be a great turnout and know from past experience that the more people who attend, the more ideas we will have to glean from. It will also result in a higher number of people who are ready to take the next

step to work together and better their community."

In her book 'Collective Courage', Dr Gordon-Nembhard describes the "long, rich history" of African American cooperatives. When stock markets failed and racial discrimination created barriers to success, Black people used co-ops as an alternate means to access goods and services. Simply put, cooperatives are companies owned by the people who use their services. They exist to satisfy an economic or social need and to provide a quality good or service.

Growing up in the far suburbs of New York City, Dr Gordon-Nembhard describes her childhood neighbourhood as "a multi-racial, religiously tolerant and anti-nuclear intentional community." "There were only four Black families including my own," she said, "and no Latino families until the 1970s, but it was a very liberal community and operated as a cooperative in terms of providing a neighborhood camp for the children some summers. We also had family days and other social activities; and many of the members of the community went to the same anti-war and civil rights



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protests.”

As a result, she understood the concept of cooperation from early on. By her 20s she had shopped in food co-ops and had also been exposed to agricultural cooperatives and housing co-ops.

Still, it wasn't until she worked for the Children's Defense Fund in Washington DC in the 1990s that Dr Gordon-Nembhard began thinking about cooperatives as a community development strategy and started learning more about cooperative businesses.

“At that time, I was an economic development analyst for the Black Community Crusade for Children at the Children's Defense Fund, and was supposed to develop community economic development strategies that supported children and family wellbeing and a sense of community amongst the African American population,” she said.

“During my study of community economic development, I began to see cooperatives in a totally new

light. The more I learned about cooperatives, especially in urban areas, I realized not only had my Ph.D. in economics not taught me anything about cooperative economics and business development, but also that many community economic development strategies did not include cooperatives and that few co-op practitioners in the US knew much about urban cooperatives and worker co-ops in particular.”

She found that even fewer people knew anything about African American cooperatives and the US African American cooperative movement – or that there even was one.

As fate would have it, Dr Gordon-Nembhard had a friend and classmate from graduate school who studied W.E.B Du Bois' theory of cooperation for African Americans. The friend suggested she read some of Du Bois' books and speeches on this topic - and soon enough a new passion was born.

Dr Gordon-Nembhard began talking to African American commu-

nity activists and attended cooperative economics conferences. She realised there was a strong denial and ignorance about there being a history of cooperative ownership among African Americans.

“I took up the challenge to prove that such a cooperative system did exist,” she said. “I had become an economist in order to help solve problems of racial economic inequality, poverty, and unequal economic development. I went to graduate school to earn a Ph.D. in economics so that I could better understand the barriers and focus on solutions,” she said.

From then on, every job she had, including her current post as Professor of Community Justice and Social Economic Development at City University of New York, was focused on community-based economic development and cooperative economics.

Through her research, she learnt of groups such as Freedom Quilting Bee, a handicraft cooperative in Alberta, Alabama, founded by women in share-cropping families in 1966. Looking to increase and stabilize their incomes, the women began selling quilts to supplement their families' farm incomes. Due to their initial success, they were able to buy 23 acres of land two years later - some of which was used to build a sewing factory and to open a day care, after school programme and sum-

mer initiatives for children.

Another cooperative Dr Gordon-Nembhard learned about was Food from the 'Hood', a programme started in 1992 by students from Crenshaw High School (in South Central Los Angeles). The young people decided to revitalise the school garden in an effort to help rebuild their community. They began by donating food they grew to the homeless; then after turning a profit, they began selling their produce in a farmer's market. Then Food From the 'Hood' started selling salad dressings and other items, with 50% of the profits earned going to college scholarships for their graduating members. During its first ten years, over \$180,000 was awarded in college scholarships to 77 graduated student managers. In addition, their high school started a college prep programme as they finally had students with financial means to attend post-secondary education.

Dr Gordon-Nembhard attests that by stimulating cooperation and developing more cooperative enterprises, this will help communities, such as Bermuda's, take control of their own economic development, keep local resources within the community, create better jobs with profit sharing and more worker and community decision making.

