

Ed Gordon

Host, Our World with Black Enterprise

Ed Gordon emerged in the late 1990s as one of the hottest news personalities in the highly competitive business. For many years, Gordon was a leading news anchor for the Black Entertainment Television (BET) network. During his early years with BET, Gordon made his name as a jack-of-all-trades: he could be seen reporting the news, undertaking investigative pieces, and conducting interviews with important black Americans. His network's small budget and staff notwithstanding, Gordon became a significant force in television news reporting after joining BET in 1988. He interviewed presidents and presidential candidates, important world figures such as South African leaders Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, and figures as diverse as Nation of Islam minister Louis Farrakhan and singer Whitney Houston. "With an impressive and eclectic interview roster," noted *People* magazine, "the personable Gordon is rapidly taking his place among Washington media heavies." Gordon joined NBC's news division for three years in the late 1990s before returning to BET. In 2004 he joined the CBS news magazine *60 Minutes* as a correspondent, and in 2005 he began hosting his own daily public affairs program on NPR Radio.

Edward Lansing Gordon, III, was born in 1960 and raised in Detroit, Michigan. Both of his parents were schoolteachers. His father was also an athlete—he won a gold medal in the long jump in the 1932 Summer Olympic Games. Even as a schoolboy, Gordon liked to pretend that he was a television journalist. He would regale his classmates with the news at the lunch table and after school, and he especially admired anchorman Dan Rather. Gordon's father died when the boy was only 11, but Ed remembers him as a warm and caring man. Gordon inherited from his parents a seriousness of purpose that has helped him to succeed in the highly competitive world of broadcast journalism.

After graduating from Western Michigan University in 1982 with a degree in communications and political science, Gordon briefly considered law school. He knew he wanted to be a television journalist, however, so instead he accepted an unpaid internship at Detroit's public television station WTVS. His hard work there eventually landed him a paying job—with a grand salary of \$11,000 per year—as host of *Detroit Black Journal*, a weekly talk show. To supplement his income, Gordon worked as a free-lance reporter for the fledgling cable network BET, headquartered in Washington, D.C.

Gordon recalls his years in Detroit as good training for the position he holds today. "It used to be that on a good day in Detroit, I'd be doing the mayor. But most days it was the dog catcher," he joked in the *Detroit Free Press*. Those "good days" could be tough as well, since the mayor in question was the cantankerous and outspoken Coleman Young. Gordon admitted in the *Washington Post* that his experiences with Young helped to hone his interview skills and make him comfortable with a wide variety of people. "If you can interview Coleman Young, you can interview anybody in the world," he said.

In 1988 Gordon joined BET as anchor of the weekly news show *BET News*. The small but increasingly significant network provides a forum for black entertainment and

highlights black issues in its information programming. Due to budget constraints, however, the BET news staff numbers fewer than 20 people—Gordon often finds himself producing his interview shows and other specials with the help of only one or two assistants. "In terms of resources or facilities, we can't compete," he stated in the Detroit Free Press. "And we don't want to compete with CNN [the Cable News Network, which broadcasts news around the clock]. We're a supplement."

Gordon has always been frank about the shortcomings of network television news. "Walk into any other newsroom," he told the Free Press. "Part of what they're missing is the diversity. It's still a white-male-oriented world." BET's mission is to provide another perspective on national and international events—one that reflects the black American point of view. Thus, when African Americans rioted in Los Angeles in 1991, BET aired a special—with Gordon as its host—entitled "Black Men Speak Out: The Aftermath," which featured blunt opinions on the social conditions that led to the uprising. Gordon also interviewed President George Bush about the situation in Los Angeles. On that story, Gordon noted in the Detroit Free Press, "we tried to go a little deeper than what the mainstream media did." BET also allots more air time to news stories about Africa and the Caribbean, providing in-depth pieces, for instance, on Haiti, South Africa, and Rwanda.

"Sometimes I would like to reach a larger audience," Gordon conceded in the Washington Post. "Not necessarily a more diverse audience, because I think that is something that the wider community—whites especially—have to aspire to. If they see 'black' attached to something, they have a tendency to turn it off automatically and feel that it does not affect or is not germane to them. And I think that BET is germane to everyone."

Despite its relatively small audience, BET has established a reputation for fairness and objectivity that has enabled Gordon to conduct interviews with a number of prominent blacks from all walks of life, including the colorful Reverend Al Sharpton and Farrakhan, who have generally been accorded one-dimensional coverage in the mainstream media. On his occasional hour-long interview show, *Conversations with Ed Gordon*, the enterprising newsman has sat down with such subjects as President Bill Clinton, actor/director Sidney Poitier, former talk show host Arsenio Hall, Washington, D.C., mayor Marion Barry, and Whitney Houston, who has twice used Gordon's forum to correct misconceptions about her career and her marriage.

The sheer volume of work Gordon does for BET as a news anchor and host of several information shows has led some observers to call the cable channel "the Ed Gordon network." A married father of one who lives in a Virginia suburb of the nation's capital, Gordon is glad for the opportunity to bring the news to people who are not necessarily represented on the major networks. "A lot of young black males tell me, 'I never watched the news before you were on,'" he noted in *People*.

Gordon explained in the Washington Post that while he asks hard questions, he also allows his interview subjects as much time as they need to formulate an answer—and he

does not edit those answers into meaningless sound bites. "You'll know that your response...will be portrayed on the tube the same way that you delivered it," he insisted. "I'm not going to twist it or turn it or take half of it away and change it."

Born Edward Lansing Gordon III in 1960 in Detroit, MI; son of Ed (a teacher) and Jimmie (a teacher) Gordon; married Karen Haney (a computer specialist); children: one daughter, Taylor. Education: Western Michigan University, BA in communications and political science, 1982.