



## Joel Gordon

**JOEL GORDON** was born in 1929 in Crofton, Kentucky. Gordon's family owned one of two stores run by Jews in the small town. Because so few Jewish families lived in town—only the Gordons and a paternal uncle's family—they traveled fifteen miles to a small synagogue in Hopkinsville, Kentucky for major events like Joel's bar mitzvah. His mother would travel to Nashville for kosher deli for the holidays.

"It was--until I got to be a fairly good basketball player, where I was accepted by everybody, 'cause I was really the best in town. Before that, it was not particularly comfortable to be Jewish."

In 1946, Joel enrolled at the University of Kentucky. For his first two years, he played for UK's basketball team under coach Adolph Rupp. Joel joined Zeta Beta Tau, the Jewish fraternity on campus, and served on the Interfraternity Council. He also served in the Air Force ROTC as an undergraduate in Lexington.

"It made--drove me to say I want to develop a career where I could develop respect and walk in a room with my head as high as anybody else's was in that room. And I think that Kentucky helped me do that."

Joel graduated from UK in 1951 and moved to Nashville, working for several different department stores in the downtown area. Joel married his wife, Bernice, whom he met on a blind date through a mutual friend from the local temple. Joel and Bernice's four children were all born in Nashville, the oldest of whom attended public schools in town at the height of violent turmoil in the city related to integration. The family was in Nashville in 1958 when white supremacists bombed the Jewish Community Center that now bears his name.

"But I just felt like if you want to be involved, and you want to be part of the community, then you better take a leadership position...people don't respect anybody that sits back and does nothing. And so, if you want to be acknowledged... You gotta do some work. Many times, I've said it's much easier to give money, if you've got it, than just work. Work is the hardest part. And the people that do the work in organizations deserve an awful lot of respect. And I see that—in everything I got, there are people that obviously can't financially help, but they provide services and do things that—more than money can buy."

The Gordons were major philanthropists within the local Jewish community and the Nashville community at large, including initiatives related to the performing arts and to public health. Gordon also funded development of a public park in his hometown Crofton, which opened in 1996 dedicated to the memory of his parents, Ben and Tillie Gordon.

"Well, if I analyze myself, I can't say I'm overly religious, but I'm bound by tradition. What was good enough for my father and mother are good enough for me. And I always felt that way."