In the spring of 1946, Irene Morgan, a black woman, boarded a bus in Virginia headed to Baltimore. She was ordered to sit at the back of the bus, as Virginia state law required, but she objected, saying that, since it was an interstate bus, the law did not apply. Morgan was arrested and fined $10.

Attorney Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP took on the case ... and won, thus striking down Jim Crow laws in interstate travel. In 1955, Rosa Parks refused a bus driver's order to move for white riders on a city bus, which initiated the Montgomery Bus Boycott and eventually precedent-setting win in the a Supreme Court.

Irene Morgan - whose bravery and tenacity paved the way for Rosa Parks to become an icon of the Civil Rights movement - was Janine Fondon's aunt.

Fendon is now the successful president and CEO of Unity First Direct Inc., a marketing and public-relations consultancy business, which she founded with her husband, Tom Fondon, in 1996.

That business was soon followed by its website counterpart UnityFirst. com - a national distributor of diversity-related e-news - that grew, as the world grew, with the explosion of workplace computer technology and the burgeoning Internet.

Her ability as a young African-American woman to forge a career in what are mostly male-dominated industries stems from that same bravery and tenacity that her Aunt Irene demonstrated more than 65 years ago. With each new position, all involving communications of some form, Fondon has deepened her public-relations and communications abilities, while picking up emerging technology skills.

Looking back at her family history and career, she noted that, somewhere along the road, she realized she'd been ahead of the curve at almost every point. A persistent focus on the future and an ever-growing skill set that she acquired in various positions - and a particular interest in computers, which she repeatedly referred to as 'fun' - ensured that she showed up at the doorstep of each new opportunity with confidence.

For this issue's focus on women in business, BusinessWest spoke at length with Fondon about her intriguing background. Her keen eye for concrete workplace skills, mixed with an awareness of different cultures and human behavior, has enabled her to launch a small consultancy group that has evolved into a growing, diversity-focused web destination targeting African-Americans and others seeking information of interest to multicultural communities.

Right Time, Right Place

Straight out of Colgate University, young New York native Janine Fondon landed her first job with ABC-TV New York in the public relations department as a broadcast analyst. In that position, she would hear viewer responses about programming content, news personalities, and sports analysts, and report back to the network.
"Working for ABC Sports ... every time they mentioned things like 'Hail Mary' passes, the Catholic Church would not be too happy," Fondon laughed. But strong miniseries like 'The Winds of War' and docudramas with controversial topics were great introductions to a broad variety of perspectives - and watchdog groups that were concerned about how the network was representing women, culture, or some specific issue, Fondon said. WJLA in Washington, D.C. helped expand her work in large metropolitan areas, especially the promo coverage she did in January 1987 when the space shuttle Challenger exploded after takeoff, just one of the milestones that helped her hone her writing skills.

"Those days of writing good stories, getting to the heart of the message ... it was really exciting figuring out what the real story was," she explained. "Those positions made me think how I might pursue something else in the communications field, and honestly, that field has changed every two years since I've been involved in it."

A move to Boston for a PR job with the Unitarian Universalist Assoc. wasn't a great fit, but with the New England area going though high-tech growth, she was thinking, as always, of the future. She targeted Digital Equipment Corp. and landed in its Corporate Communications department as the associate editor of Digital's worldwide internal publication, Decworld.

"At Digital, we were communicating internally and with the world, much like we do with Facebook and other forms of communication today, but we were doing it before the mainstream," Fondon told BusinessWest.

The jump from religion to technology wasn't an issue. "This was a global company, and I would be able to see what it was like to build this global effort," she said. Later, with the eventual demise of Digital, her communications and technology skills made her a solid fit in the financial industry which was entering a new age of online sharing of highly confidential financial information.

Working for BankBoston, she was writing not only for the internal print magazine but online vehicles as well - the early development of online communications for the masses. People were using WordPerfect, and everyone still wanted hard copies, and her co-workers were resistant to online bulletin boards and new computer programs. Fondon thought they were great. "I don't know about you, but IBM Selectric was not my idea of fun, so anything that made it easier, I was all for it," she laughed.

"Everybody was asking, how are we going to deal with all this change - change in management, change in technology, and the efforts to bring more women into the workplace?" she continued. Meanwhile, she was experiencing major changes in her own life - a husband who came from the world of IBM, and a baby daughter, had her reevaluating her path.

Worldwide Change

Fondon can remember people saying that newsrooms weren't diverse. "I said, 'if you think newsrooms aren't diverse, you should enter into corporate communications!'

Merging her past positions, her skills, and what she saw as a need in all workplaces, Fondon created a small consulting company that she named Unity First Direct. Her husband, Tom, with his IT skills, joined her soon after. She kept busy with magazine writing, brochures, reports, and the like, and within that same year, she and her husband noticed that diversity really was becoming a buzzword, and more venues for community outreach were needed.

So she launched the Unity First newspaper and built a small following, but discovered a growing need for different avenues of diversity awareness. Through e-marketing, outreach, and public relations, Fondon could
help clients engage new audiences and build their brands with diverse, emerging markets, including people of all backgrounds, experiences, and geographic locations. "As we moved from being a print publication to online, and more diversity consulting>" she said, "we saw companies had all the pieces, so we would work to help them connect the dots."

Eric Gouvin, director of the Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship at Western New England University, has worked with Fondon on many occasions, having used her as an expert panelist and through co-sponsored events. "We've had diversity events that focus on inclusive management," said. "Your workforce has its own sets of traits and properties: the way you manage young folks versus old folks, women versus men, people of color versus other races ... there are ways of handling all that, not heavy-handed, but sensitively."

As Fondon described this aspect of her work, "if a company has a project and they want to develop it to meet this 21st century approach through demographics, content, and tone, then we can help them shape that project.

She explained what she means by 'tone.' "Companies that are trying to position themselves in today's workplace need to reflect diversity inclusion in their internal communications, external communications community relations, and media approach, and they need people like us to help them sharpen those skills."

She prefers to not spend energy on the negative, which includes all the things that can happen when a proper approach to tone is ignored - everything from diminishing one's culture to lawsuits - but to focus on positive outcomes, the companies that make a respectful and educated difference and, thus, enhance their own success.

Today, UnityFirst.com is a growing voice on the Internet and one of the most in-depth resources for connecting with diverse communities and press across the U.S. and beyond. Engaging more than 2 million readers from corporations and boards to cross-cultural business leaders striving for new bottom-line success, the site is a content driver of news, with more than 4,000 national press members, including top mainstream business publications; television, Internet, and radio sources; and press from the African, African-American, Caribbean, Hispanic/Latino, and Native American communities.

In addition, UnityFirst.com delivers content to ForbesDiversity.com an outgrowth of Forbes.com that offers special sections with comprehensive subject matter from different perspectives.

Driven to Success

In addition to a multitude of speaking engagements, Fondon is an adjunct professor at Baypath College and Westfield State University. She and Tom are also targeting young local middle- and high-school students through two projects, the Digital Ambassadors Program and the Common Ground Leadership Forum and Awards.

"It's our initiative to work with young people around the technology and diversity topics," said Fondon. "Both programs emphasize the importance of digital learning, inclusion, and leadership."

Part of her work with students is to keep the dialogue applicable to young people's interests. Considering the speed at which technology and young people's interests evolve, Fondon said, "as a teacher when you think you're making it relevant and interesting, revisit what that means, because either you got it right, or you didn't."

Gouvin agrees, and praises Fondon's ability to consult with employers. "If you want to be effective, you've got to find a way to connect with the people who are working for you," he said. "It's not a matter of being PC
[politically correct], or doing it because that's what everyone's doing; there is sense to it. Janine has always made a case for diversity that is compelling."

Along with her tenacious and pioneering qualities - like those that spurred her Aunt Irene to such groundbreaking action - Fondon will continue to assist clients with marketing, educate communities about diversity awareness through digital, print, and verbal communication, and help individuals and corporations realize their full potential.

In short, she's keeping them ahead of the curve.

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