

Women Leaders: Sonia Sotomayor

By Biography.com Editors and A+E Networks on 07.31.16

Word Count **1,279**



Official Supreme Court photo of Sonia Sotomayor Photo: Collection of the Supreme Court of the United States, Steve Petteway source - <http://www.oyez.org/ju>

Synopsis: Sonia Sotomayor was born in 1954 in the Bronx, a borough of New York City. Her desire to be a judge was first inspired by the TV show "Perry Mason." She graduated from Yale Law School and passed the bar exam in 1980. She became a U.S. district judge in 1992 and was elevated to the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in 1998. In 2009, she became the first Latina Supreme Court justice in U.S. history.

Early Life

Judge Sonia Sotomayor was born in the South Bronx area of New York City on June 25, 1954, and was the elder of two children. Her parents, Juan and Celina Baez Sotomayor, were born in Puerto Rico and moved to New York City to raise their children. Sotomayor's family functioned on a very modest income; her mother was a nurse at a methadone clinic, and her father was a tool-and-die worker.

Sotomayor's first leanings toward the justice system began after watching an episode of the television show "Perry Mason." When a prosecutor on the program said he did not mind losing when a defendant turned out to be innocent, Sotomayor later said to *The New York Times* that she "made the quantum leap: If that was the prosecutor's job, then the guy who made the decision to dismiss the case was the judge. That was what I was going to be."

When her father died in 1963, her mother worked hard to raise her children as a single parent. She placed what Sotomayor would later call an "almost fanatical emphasis" on a higher education, pushing the children to become fluent in English and making huge sacrifices to purchase a set of encyclopedias that would give them proper research materials for school.

Higher Education

Sotomayor graduated from Cardinal Spellman High School in the Bronx in 1972 and entered the Ivy League, attending Princeton University. The young Latina felt overwhelmed by her new school. After she received low marks on her first midterm paper, she sought help, taking more English and writing classes. She also became highly involved with the Puerto Rican groups on campus, including Acción Puertorriqueña and the Third World Center. The groups, she said, provided her "with an anchor I needed to ground myself in that new and different world." She also worked with the university's discipline committee, where she started developing her legal skills.

All of Sotomayor's hard work paid off when she graduated summa cum laude from Princeton in 1976. She was also awarded the Pyne Prize, which is the highest academic award given to Princeton undergraduates. That same year, Sotomayor entered Yale Law School, where she was an editor for the Yale Law Journal. She received her J.D. in 1979, passed the bar in 1980 and immediately began work as an assistant district attorney in Manhattan, serving as a trial lawyer under District Attorney Robert Morgenthau. Sotomayor was responsible for prosecuting robbery, assault, murder, police brutality and child pornography cases.

Legal Practice And Judicial Appointments

In 1984, Sotomayor entered private practice, making partner at the commercial litigation firm Pavia & Harcourt, where she specialized in intellectual property litigation. She moved from associate to partner at the firm in 1988. While she climbed the ladder there, Sotomayor also served on the board of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund, the New York City Campaign Finance Board and the State of New York Mortgage Agency.

Sotomayor's pro bono work at these agencies caught the attention of Senators Ted Kennedy and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who were partially responsible for her appointment as U.S. District Court judge for the Southern District of New York. President George H.W. Bush nominated her for the position in 1992, which was confirmed unanimously by the Senate on August 11, 1992. When she joined the court, she was its youngest judge. On her 43rd birthday, June 25, 1997, she was nominated for the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals by President Bill Clinton. She was confirmed by the Senate that October.

In addition to her work on the Court of Appeals, Sotomayor also began teaching law as an adjunct professor at New York University in 1998 and at Columbia Law School in 1999. She has also received honorary law degrees from Herbert H. Lehman College, Princeton University and Brooklyn Law School. And she served on the board of trustees at Princeton.

First Latina Supreme Court Justice

On May 26, 2009, President Barack Obama announced his nomination of Sotomayor for Supreme Court justice. The nomination was confirmed by the U.S. Senate in August 2009, by a vote of 68-31, making Sotomayor the first Latina Supreme Court justice in U.S. history.

In June 2015, Sotomayor made history again (twice) when she was among the majority in two landmark Supreme Court rulings. On June 25, she was one of six justices to uphold a critical component of the 2010 Affordable Care Act—often referred to as Obamacare—in *King v. Burwell*. The decision allows the federal government to continue providing subsidies to Americans who purchase health care through "exchanges," regardless of whether they are state or federally operated. Sotomayor is credited as a key force in the ruling, having presented cautionary arguments against the potential dismantling of the law. The majority ruling, written by Chief Justice John Roberts, thus further cemented the Affordable Care Act. Conservative Justices Clarence Thomas, Samuel Alito and Antonin Scalia were in dissent, with Scalia presenting a scathing opinion.

On June 26, the Supreme Court handed down its second historic decision in as many days, with a 5–4 majority ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges* that made same-sex marriage legal in all 50 states. Sotomayor joined Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Anthony Kennedy, Stephen Breyer and Elena Kagan in the majority, with Roberts, Alito, Scalia and Thomas dissenting.

Utah v. Edward Joseph Strieff, Jr. Dissent

In June 2016, Sotomayor made headlines when she wrote a scathing dissent in the case of *Utah v. Edward Joseph Strieff, Jr.*, a case involving civil liberties with regard to preventing unlawful searches and seizures protected by the U.S. Constitution's Fourth Amendment. The court ruled in its 5-3 decision "that evidence found by police officers after illegal stops may be used in court if the officers conducted their searches after learning that the defendants had outstanding arrest warrants," according to *The New York Times*. Justice Clarence Thomas wrote the majority opinion, which is considered a major victory for the police.

In her dissent, Sotomayor stated, "The mere existence of a warrant not only gives an officer legal cause to arrest and search a person, it also forgives an officer who, with no knowledge of the warrant at all, unlawfully stops that person on a whim or hunch." She continued, citing racial unrest and protests that lasted for weeks after a white officer shot and killed Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager in Ferguson, Missouri.

“The Department of Justice recently reported that in the town of Ferguson, Missouri, with a population of 21,000, 16,000 people had outstanding warrants against them,” she continued, “By legitimizing the conduct that produces this double consciousness, this case tells everyone, white and black, guilty and innocent, that an officer can verify your legal status at any time. It says that your body is subject to invasion while courts excuse the violation of your rights. It implies that you are not a citizen of a democracy but the subject of a carceral state, just waiting to be cataloged.”

The court insisted in its opinion that this incident was isolated, but Sotomayor emphatically challenged that assertion and said this decision not only chisels away at protections under the Fourth Amendment but also will affect minorities and low-income individuals disproportionately.

Quiz

- 1 Which of the following options BEST reflects two central ideas of the article?
- (A) Sonia Sotomayor was appointed by Barack Obama to the Supreme Court in 2009; she was a part of the majority in the decisions that upheld the Affordable Care Act and legalized same-sex marriage.
 - (B) Raised in a low-income family by a single mother, Sonia Sotomayor worked hard to get an excellent education; she eventually became the first Latina woman appointed to the Supreme Court and has been a part of the majority in several landmark cases.
 - (C) With degrees from Princeton University and Yale Law School, Sonia Sotomayor began a successful career as a lawyer before she was appointed as a judge in New York; she was appointed by Barack Obama to the Supreme Court in 2009.
 - (D) At a young age, Sonia Sotomayor decided that she wanted to become a judge; while working as a lawyer, she volunteered on the boards of several important agencies, which led to her first appointment as a U.S. District Court judge in New York.
- 2 Which selection from the section "Higher Education" BEST reflects the central idea that Sotomayor excelled in college?
- (A) The young Latina felt overwhelmed by her new school. After she received low marks on her first midterm paper, she sought help, taking more English and writing classes.
 - (B) She also became highly involved with the Puerto Rican groups on campus, including Acción Puertorriqueña and the Third World Center.
 - (C) All of Sotomayor's hard work paid off when she graduated summa cum laude from Princeton in 1976. She was also awarded the Pyne Prize, which is the highest academic award given to Princeton undergraduates.
 - (D) She received her J.D. in 1979, passed the bar in 1980 and immediately began work as an assistant district attorney in Manhattan, serving as a trial lawyer under District Attorney Robert Morgenthau.

- 3 Which of the following options BEST describes the structure of the article?
- (A) The article describes Sotomayor's education and career and focuses on some of the recent cases she has played an important role in.
 - (B) The article compares the work Sotomayor did as a U.S. District Court judge, with the work she is doing as a Supreme Court justice.
 - (C) The article explains the many challenges Sotomayor faced throughout her education, and how Sotomayor addressed those challenges.
 - (D) The article discusses the important cases Sotomayor has seen in the Supreme Court and the effects of the decisions that were made.

- 4 Why does the author include the last section of the article?
- (A) to highlight Sotomayor's conflict with some of the other justices of the Supreme Court
 - (B) to highlight how disappointed Sotomayor is with the state of the criminal justice system in the U.S.
 - (C) to highlight Sotomayor's thoughts about the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri
 - (D) to highlight how Sotomayor has worked to defend the rights of minorities and low-income people

Answer Key

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