

Women Leaders: Sonia Sotomayor

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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 raised in the Bronx, a borough of New York City. Her desire to be a judge was first inspired by a TV show about a lawyer named Perry Mason. She graduated from Yale Law School and passed the bar exam in 1980. She became a U.S. district judge in 1992, a judge on the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in 1998, and, in 2009, she became the first Latina Supreme Court justice.

Early Life

Sonia Maria Sotomayor was born in New York City on June 25, 1954. Her mother, Celina Baez, left Puerto Rico in 1944, at age 17, and came to the United States to join the Women's Army Corp (WAC) during World War II. After the war, she married Juan Sotomayor, a factory worker who also came from Puerto Rico. Sonia's brother, Juan, was born in 1957. By the time she was 8, Sonia had to have insulin injections for juvenile diabetes. Sonia's father died of a heart attack when she was 9 and her brother was 6. As a single parent, her mother sometimes worked two jobs to feed the family. Sonia read Nancy Drew books that got her interested in law and crime, but watching a TV show called "Perry Mason," about courtroom trials, made her want to be a judge. At the end of each show, when the judge spoke, she realized that "he was the most important player in that room."

Celina Sotomayor pushed her children to work hard in school so they could go to college. She pushed herself as well, starting college to become a nurse when Sonia and Juan were in high school. Money was saved to buy a set of encyclopedias that would give them proper research materials for school.

Higher Education

Sotomayor graduated No. 1 in her class from Cardinal Spellman High School in the Bronx in 1972, and she won a scholarship to Princeton University. The young Latina felt overwhelmed by her new school and received low marks on her first midterm papers, which only made her seek more help from professors and writing classes. Sotomayor became involved with the Puerto Rican groups on campus that she said gave her "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. She graduated summa cum laude, with honors, in 1976 and was awarded the Pyne Prize, which is the highest academic award given to a graduating senior.

That same year, Sotomayor entered Yale Law School, where she became an editor for the Yale Law Journal. She received her law degree in 1979 and passed the bar exam to become a lawyer the following year. Sotomayor immediately began working as an assistant district attorney in Manhattan. She became a trial lawyer under the famous District Attorney Robert Morgenthau, who served New York City for 34 years. Sotomayor worked on cases of robbery, assault, murder and police brutality for New York City until 1984.

Legal Practice And Judicial Appointments

In 1984, Sotomayor began working for the law firm Pavia & Harcourt, and in 1988, she became a partner in the firm. She also volunteered 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.

All of this caught the attention of Senators Ted Kennedy and Daniel Patrick Moynihan as well as President George H.W. Bush, and she was approved to be a U.S. District judge by the Senate on August 11, 1992, becoming its youngest judge. Five years later, President Bill Clinton and the Senate made her a judge on a higher court, the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

In addition to her work on the Court of Appeals, Sotomayor also began teaching law.

First Latina Supreme Court Justice

On May 26, 2009, President Barack Obama announced his nomination of Sotomayor to the Supreme Court. The nomination was confirmed by the Senate in August 2009 by a vote of 68-31, and Sonia Sotomayor became the first Latina in U.S. history to serve on the Supreme Court.

In June 2015, Sotomayor voted with the majority in two landmark Supreme Court rulings. On June 25, she was one of six justices to uphold an important part of the 2010 Affordable Care Act, often referred to as Obamacare, with a vote of 6-3. The King v. Burwell decision allows the federal government to give some money to Americans who buy health care online from a state-run or federal government "exchange." Sotomayor's warnings about what would happen if the payments were stopped, were important.

On June 26, the Supreme Court handed down a second historic decision. A 5-4 majority ruling in Obergefell v. Hodges made same-sex marriage legal in all 50 states.

Her Dissent In Utah v. Strieff

In June 2016, Sotomayor was in the minority of a 5-3 decision in Utah v. Edward Joseph Strieff, Jr. The majority wrote 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." Justice Clarence Thomas wrote the majority opinion. The outcome was considered a major victory for the police.

Sotomayor wrote: "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. 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."

The protests lasted for weeks after a white officer shot and killed Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager in Ferguson, Missouri. Sotomayor added: "It says that your body is subject to invasion while courts excuse the violation of your rights." She said she worries that our democracy is turning into a prison state that can search and arrest anyone at any time.

The court insisted in its opinion that this incident was not the norm. Sotomayor feels it chips away at protections under the Fourth Amendment that forbid unfair searches and will affect minorities and low-income people more than other Americans.

Sonia Sotomayor married another lawyer, Kevin Noonan, in 1976. They divorced in 1983. Her brother, Juan, is a physician in Syracuse, New York. Celina Sotomayor is almost 90 years old and lives in Florida. Sonia calls her mother every day.

Quiz

- 1 Which of the following selections from the article BEST develops a central idea?
- (A) Sotomayor graduated No. 1 in her class from Cardinal Spellman High School in the Bronx in 1972, and she won a scholarship to Princeton University.
 - (B) She also volunteered 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.
 - (C) The nomination was confirmed by the Senate in August 2009 by a vote of 68-31, and Sonia Sotomayor became the first Latina in U.S. history to serve on the Supreme Court.
 - (D) On June 26, the Supreme Court handed down a second historic decision. A 5–4 majority ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges* made same-sex marriage legal in all 50 states.

- 2 Read the following sentence from the section "Her Dissent In *Utah v. Strieff*."

Sotomayor feels it chips away at protections under the Fourth Amendment that forbid unfair searches and will affect minorities and low-income people more than other Americans.

Does this sentence support the main idea of the article? How?

- (A) Yes, it explains why President Obama nominated Sotomayor to be a Supreme Court justice.
- (B) Yes, it reveals some of the values that guide Sotomayor's votes on Supreme Court cases.
- (C) No, it focuses on Sotomayor's opinions about a case for which she was in the minority.
- (D) No, it suggests that Sotomayor has been unsuccessful as a Supreme Court justice.

3

Read the sentences below from the first and last sections of the article.

Celina Sotomayor pushed her children to work hard in school so they could go to college.

Celina Sotomayor is almost 90 years old and lives in Florida. Sonia calls her mother every day.

How does the relationship between these two selections develop a MAIN idea of the article?

- (A) They suggest that Justice Sotomayor values the importance of her mother in her life and career.
- (B) They explain how Justice Sotomayor's mother pushed her to pursue a career in law.
- (C) They show how Justice Sotomayor's relationship with her mother has changed over time.
- (D) They describe how Justice Sotomayor spends her time outside of the courtroom.

4

Read the following paragraphs from the article. Which one has been used to transition from one phase of Sotomayor's life to another?

- (A) Celina Sotomayor pushed her children to work hard in school so they could go to college. She pushed herself as well, starting college to become a nurse when Sonia and Juan were in high school. Money was saved to buy a set of encyclopedias that would give them proper research materials for school.
- (B) In 1984, Sotomayor began working for the law firm Pavia & Harcourt, and in 1988, she became a partner in the firm. She also volunteered 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.
- (C) All of this caught the attention of Senators Ted Kennedy and Daniel Patrick Moynihan as well as President George H.W. Bush, and she was approved to be a U.S. District judge by the Senate on August 11, 1992, becoming its youngest judge. Five years later, President Bill Clinton and the Senate made her a judge on a higher court, the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.
- (D) In June 2016, Sotomayor was in the minority of a 5-3 decision in *Utah v. Edward Joseph Strieff, Jr.* The majority wrote 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." Justice Clarence Thomas wrote the majority opinion. The outcome was considered a major victory for the police.

Answer Key

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