

Sonia Sotomayor



Integrity

Sonia had every reason to become another statistic. She had all the excuses. She was a young Hispanic girl who grew up poor in the housing projects of the Bronx, one of the five boroughs in New York City. Her parents immigrated to America from Puerto Rico with very little education and limited income. At the young age of eight, she was diagnosed with Juvenile Diabetes. The following year, her father unexpectedly died. Her mother had to work long hours to keep the lights on and to put food on the table. As she grew up, Sonia saw the negative influences of drugs, violence, gangs and crime. She walked through it every day on her way to and from school. Yes, her story could have been one of tragedy—the kind that is read about in papers and viewed on the local news. It also could have been a story of wasted potential—the kind you never read about or even discuss, but you know exists in abundance. However, this book is about role models—the individuals who change what is possible, the ones who fight the odds and refuse to give up in the face of adversity, the ones who inspire us to be what we don't think is even possible for ourselves. This is the story of Sonia Sotomayor—the first Hispanic American and third female to serve on the highest court in the land—The Supreme Court of the United States of America.

The Supreme Court is called the highest court in the land because the decisions of the Supreme Court are final. A case must be appealed time and again by lower courts before it is even considered by the Supreme Court. Of the 7,000 petitions

issued to get in front of the Supreme Court each year, less than 100 of those cases get heard. As a general rule, only the most compelling cases with far-reaching implications are considered. There are nine Supreme Court Justices who rule on each case and the majority wins, whether it is a 9-0 unanimous decision or a 5-4 controversial decision. The decisions of the Supreme Court set a binding precedent for all other cases at lower courts and become the law of the land. For example, the Supreme Court provided a unanimous 9-0 decision in the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* case that deemed it unconstitutional to provide separate public schools for black and white students. This case reversed many state laws and initiated the end of legalized segregation in many states. Important Civil Rights cases that followed cited this precedent and argued that if it was against the law to provide separate schools than it was also illegal to have separate drinking fountains, restaurants and public pools. Landmark cases like this change the direction and makeup of this country. Yet, hearing cases of this magnitude are part of the daily routine for the nine Supreme Court Justices, which is why the job interview is so rigorous and demanding.

There are a couple of unique points about becoming one of the nine justices who sit on the bench of the Supreme Court. First, it is not a job that anyone can apply for in the traditional sense. It's not like someone can submit an application or email a resume. The only way to get this job is to be nominated by the president of the United States. After being nominated, members of the United States Senate must confirm the nomination by voting for or against that person. Before the vote occurs, the Senate conducts a lengthy interview where members of Congress grill the nominee on every ruling that person has ever made and dissect every personal belief that person has ever espoused. The nominee is judged on her/his intellect, fairness on the bench and character. Very little of the individual's personal and professional life is left unfettered. The reason for all of this scrutiny is simple—an appointment to the Supreme Court is an appointment for life. No one can fire a Supreme Court Justice, so it is important to hire those who can be trusted to apply the laws of the land fairly to each and every case.



Photo courtesy of Steve Petteway, Collection of the Supreme Court of the United States.

According to President Barack Obama, Judge Sotomayor possesses that kind of integrity. “What Sonia will bring to the Court,” he said, “is not only the knowledge and experience acquired over a course of a brilliant legal career, but the wisdom accumulated from an inspiring life’s journey.” What was not lost on the president was the significance of the first African-American president nominating the first Hispanic American to the Supreme Court. He saw this moment as historic and her story as inspiring. He went on to say, “This is a wonderful day for Judge Sotomayor and her family, but I also think it’s a wonderful day for America.” He knew in his heart that this was yet another step in the right direction for this country. “It’s about every child who will grow up thinking to him or herself, if Sonia Sotomayor can make it, then maybe I can, too.”

Those reading this chapter must ask themselves how this little girl succeeded to this level when so many others with similar barriers did not. There are several factors that help explain her rise to the top, albeit the most significant one was sitting in the front row when President Obama announced Sotomayor as his nominee for the Supreme Court. Sotomayor said, “I stand on the shoulders of countless people, yet there is

one extraordinary person who is my life aspiration. That person is my mother, Celina Sotomayor. I have often said that I am all I am because of her, and I am only half the woman she is.”

A number of studies indicate that the best predictor of a child’s success in school is the level of parental expectations. Sotomayor said of her mother, “She had almost a fanatical emphasis on education.” Mrs. Sotomayor set this example by purchasing a set of Encyclopedia Britannica. Before the Internet came along, encyclopedias were one of the few ways to gain access to facts and knowledge outside of school or the library. According to Sonia, they were the only family in the projects to own a set of encyclopedias. Her mother also sent her children to private school. To pay for this type of education, she worked six days a week at a local hospital. In an effort to make more money, Mrs. Sotomayor wanted to go back to school to become a registered nurse. She could not afford the tuition, so she asked her children to work after school and during summer vacation. For two years, they all pitched in to make life better down the road. Sonia didn’t see it as a sacrifice and said the experience inspired her to put an even greater emphasis on her education. “With an example like that,” Sonia later commented, “My brother and I had no choice but to do well in school.”

A couple of events in Sonia’s youth helped her understand that tomorrow is promised to no one. At the age of eight, she was diagnosed with Juvenile Diabetes. This is a chronic disease that requires constant monitoring of her blood sugar levels, daily self-administered insulin shots and a major adjustment toward a healthy diet. While this diagnosis is not a death sentence if managed properly, it sent her a message that she was not infallible. Years later, a former boss and mentor, Robert Morgenthau, commented that her diabetes made her think that she wasn’t going to be around forever and that her time on earth is very precious. Specifically, he said, “In case the disease affected her longevity, she wanted to accomplish and give back as much as possible.”

The other life-altering moment came at the young age of nine when she witnessed her father collapse to the kitchen

floor while suffering a heart attack. He died the next day and the close-knit family was never the same. The loss of her father contributed to her shy and withdrawn nature as a pre-teen. She turned to books and her favorite was the Nancy Drew Detective Series. She liked the mystery and the adventure of it all. Unfortunately, an adult told her that being a detective was not a good career for a woman with diabetes. She found an alternative route in a popular television show called *Perry Mason*. Every week, she watched Perry Mason work his magic as a lawyer in the courtroom. While watching this show, she made a unique observation that changed her life forever. "I realized that the judge was the most important player in that room," Sotomayor said. "Every time Mason wanted to do something, he had to ask the judge for permission." At the young age of 10, she knew, "That was what I was going to be." Since that moment, she never deviated from that life goal of becoming a judge.

A popular quote says, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." In other words, a person's character is built in the difficult life circumstances and the struggle to overcome such turmoil. Instead of giving up or giving in, Sonia forged ahead and developed an ambition in life that clearly drove her to become the best version of herself. In eighth grade, she was the Valedictorian at Sacred Heart School. Four years later she delivered the Valedictorian Speech at Cardinal Spelling High School. In 1972, Sonia received a full-ride scholarship to Princeton University, one of the top universities in the country. Four years later, she graduated summa cum laude and won the Taylor Pyne Prize, which is given to the best overall student who reflects both strong grades and service. The next fall, she was accepted to Yale Law School, again on full scholarship. While there, she served as the editor of the *Yale Law Journal* and graduated at the top of her class. The following year she passed the New York Bar Exam and was certified to practice law in the state of New York.

While this story could certainly be about Sotomayor's determination, drive or perseverance, it is really a story about her integrity. At this point in her life, she had all the credentials

to land a job at one of the top law firms, making an annual salary that is commensurate with the top one percent of wage earners in this country. No one would have faulted her for it. In fact, that kind of career move is expected of someone in her position. Sotomayor, however, has never been driven by money or notoriety. She is driven by her integrity, which is an internal value system that is based upon honesty, fairness and ethical principles. An individual with integrity uses those core values as a constant guide to make decisions. Instead of the safe and predictable route, she chose to take a job as an assistant district attorney for the City of New York. Her job was to prosecute individuals who were accused of breaking laws and, if warranted, put them behind bars where they can't do it again. She felt it was a noble profession—one that protected society and helped keep the streets safe. This meant a great deal to her as she saw the devastating effects of crime and violence first-hand while growing up in the city. In a way, she saw it as a way of helping low-income families who were stuck in a crime-infested city. However, most of her classmates at Yale were shocked by her decision to take a public service job with such low pay. She later commented, "They could not understand why I was taking this job."

She proved herself in that role, learning the ins and outs of the law—the kind of knowledge that they can't teach at an Ivy League Law School. Her greatest strength was relating cases to the jury using everyday language that the common citizen could understand. What really made her a standout was another hallmark trait she possessed—preparation. She prepared for every case like it was the most important one of the year. "I was taught to be thorough in my investigations, careful in my fact finding, meticulous in my legal arguments," she said. "Yet most of all, I was taught to do justice." Those around her noticed her promise. One supervisor merely wrote on an evaluation, "She is a superstar in the making." Another assistant district attorney described Sotomayor this way, "She had natural qualities of leadership and presence that, combined with her other professional attributes, made her shine with all the characteristics of a trial lawyer."

After leaving her job as an assistant district attorney, she started her own private practice and later became a partner at a larger firm in New York City. Still, she never forgot her childhood dream of becoming a judge. In 1990, one of her colleagues at the firm, David Botwinik, urged her to apply for an opening at a U.S. District Court Judge in New York. She initially declined, stating, “I had no chance of ever being selected for the most prestigious and respected federal district court in the nation.” Botwinik insisted; he cleared her schedule for the week and assigned three support staff to help her complete the application process. In 1991, President George H.W. Bush nominated her for the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York. The following year, she sailed through the confirmation hearings by the Senate and was officially hired in August of 1992. She served in that position until 1997 when President Bill Clinton nominated her to sit on the Second Circuit Court of Appeals, the highest federal court in New York. This position put her on the fast track to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Being a judge is a serious responsibility because so much power comes with the job. Every ruling changes the lives of those on trial and this is not a job Judge Sotomayor ever took lightly. She understood that with great power comes great responsibility. “You’re in a different position when you’re the one signing that judgment of conviction,” Sotomayor explained. “It’s your name that’s on that line and you’re making the choice about how much time that person’s life is going to be abbreviated in terms of their liberty.” While sentencing deeply affects her, in the end, it’s still about applying the facts to the case and making the best decision possible.

One unusual and consistent quality has stood out about Sonia Sotomayor—she is nice. Whether it is people who worked on her staff in the courts or lawyers who tried cases before Her Honor, most everyone comments on how polite and caring she was to them. Mark Citrin, an assistant on her staff in New York said, “No matter how harried she was, Sonia never failed to be pleasant and always said ‘please’ and ‘thank you.’” Donald

Zavelo is a lawyer who worked on the famous Major League Baseball work stoppage case that Judge Sotomayor presided over. He reflected, “Judges don’t have a lot of time to make people feel comfortable in their courtrooms or spend a lot of time with people, but she made everyone feel comfortable. She had a really human quality that was striking.” While some people might not think being nice or polite matters, perhaps the following comment will help change some minds. “She was clearly a remarkable person and it wasn’t surprising to see where she ended up,” Zavelo recalled. We, as Americans, seem to root for friendly people who go out of their way to demonstrate kindness. It can certainly be argued that qualities like compassion, generosity and civility are just as important as being smart, talented and determined.

When President Obama called Judge Sotomayor on her cell phone to inform her that she was his choice for the Supreme Court, he asked her to make two promises. “The first was to remain the person I was, and the second was to remain connected to my community,” Sotomayor relayed of the conversation. “And I said to him that those were two easy promises to make, because those two things I could not change.” Indeed, Judge Sotomayor never forgot where she came from. She has consistently provided pro bono work for Latinos who could not afford legal representation over the years and she served on the board of directors for several organizations that look out for the rights of minorities. She believes that she routinely provided eight or more hours a week to such important causes, which is equivalent to adding one full workday to her week. She clearly felt an obligation to give freely of her time and effort. In her own words, “I, as an individual, believe that those of us who have opportunities in this life must give back to those who have less.”

Judge Sotomayor’s story should inspire us all and remind us what is possible if we put forth our best each and every day. We all have to start somewhere and Sonia started in the housing projects of the Bronx. Some 50 years later, those buildings have been renamed in her honor. No less than 13 high schools

have already been named after her as well. Why? She is an inspiration and a true role model for many Americans. What's so refreshing about her is that she openly embraces this role and tries hard to set the best example possible. One former supervisor, Richard Girgente, proudly said of her, "She felt she had opportunities many others did not have and therefore had a higher responsibility to be a role model." By no means is she perfect and she doesn't believe anyone can or should be perfect. However, her example is a blueprint that we all can follow—find something in life that brings you passion and fulfillment. If at all possible, set short- and long-term goals to turn that passion into your life's work. Don't let others tell you what is and is not possible for your future. Find the courage to turn your dreams into reality. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, live each day with integrity and purpose. Set a positive example for others based on doing what's right and ethical. For if you do, good things will undoubtedly come your way.