

***The Triumph of Education: Sonia Sotomayor and her rise to  
Supreme Court Justice***

by

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Submitted to the Board of School of Humanities  
School of Purchase College, State University of New York  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College  
State University of New York

May 2023

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Second Reader: Professor Leandro Benmergui

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## *Sonia Sotomayor, United States Supreme Court Justice: Her Story*

Sonia Sotomayor is living proof that education is the conduit to high achievement and accomplishment in society. According to political journalists Jonathan Martin and Mike Allen, “As a prosecutor, litigator, and trial and appellate judge, Sotomayor brings more federal judicial experience to the Supreme Court than any justice in 100 years, and more overall judicial experience than anyone confirmed for the Court in the past 70 years.”<sup>1</sup> This paper seeks to demonstrate how education can help individuals move up in the ranks of society, thus conquering the limits that can come from poverty, ethnicity, and gender. In 2009, Sotomayor became the first Latina appointed to the United States Supreme Court. Her academic preparation and court experience were critical tools in her achieving this prestigious position.

Sonia is a Nuyorican, a person of Puerto Rican descent who is born and raised in New York City. Her parents emigrated from Puerto Rico to New York City during the Great Migration of the 1940s, when, many Puerto Ricans, who were US citizens, left the island seeking economic opportunities. She grew up in a housing project in the Bronx surrounded by a family environment that maintained a strong sense of culture. A young Sonia had devoted parents, a doting paternal grandmother, and a community of uncles and aunts who supported and loved her. Sotomayor adored her father, who died when she was nine due to an alcohol-related illness. In 1962, just before her eighth birthday, she was diagnosed with juvenile diabetes, which has afflicted her since. Her early years with all those challenges did not deter her from obtaining her

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<sup>1</sup> “How, Why, Obama Picked Sotomayor,” *POLITICO*, <https://www.politico.com/story/2009/05/how-why-obama-picked-sotomayor-022970>.

high school diploma, attending college, and graduating with honors. She went to Princeton and later received a law degree from Yale University.

Sotomayor has become a role model, inspiration, and symbol for many Americans nationwide. She is known for her outspoken advocacy for the Puerto Rican-American community and the Hispanic community at large. Justice Sotomayor is known for being the first Latina and the third woman to serve on the United States Supreme Court. She has also ruled with the majority on two landmark cases: one that upheld the Affordable Care Act and the other that legalized same-sex marriage.

This paper explores fascinating facets of Sonia Sotomayor's life, starting from her childhood and concluding with her position as a liberal Justice of the United States Supreme Court. Each chapter seeks to highlight a stage of Sotomayor's life. Chapter One recounts Sotomayor's childhood and family roots in Puerto Rico and New York City. In Chapter Two, the paper concentrates on details of her education from elementary school to her years in college and university. Chapters Three and Four try to reveal her career in law before her nomination to the Supreme Court and her trajectory as a liberal Associate Justice, the first Hispanic and one of the few females to hold such a distinction. Chapter Five shows the iconic figure Sotomayor has become and the place she has earned in society.

## Chapter I: Childhood

Sotomayor family was one of thousands that emigrated to America following the Jones Act of 1917 which made Puerto Ricans American citizens. Emigration increased after the 1928 San Felipe hurricane, and the “poverty was so widespread that hunger, to the verge of starvation, was commonplace.”<sup>2</sup> The economic situation of the island was such that many Puerto Ricans were left with no choice but to seek a better future elsewhere. As noted by historians Vicky L. Ruiz and Virginia Sanchez-Korrol, “The cultivation of coffee, sugar, and other land-based products practically disappeared.”<sup>3</sup> The latter caused a massive migration from rural to urban areas on the island, resulting in Puerto Ricans migrating to the United States, leaving their tropical island and culture behind. But it was all worth it because they would come to the United States to pursue the American Dream. Unfortunately, the Great Depression of the 1930s was a catalyst for placing Americans, including all migrants, in the most challenging situation the county has ever endured.

The October 29, 1929 stock market crash shattered the nation's economy. Historian Michael McGerr. states, “The Great Depression affected nearly everyone in America, but it was most severe for those already disadvantaged.”<sup>4</sup> President Franklyn Delano Roosevelt won the presidency in 1932 and replaced President Herbert Clark Hoover. President Roosevelt's New Deal programs slowly began lifting the economy.

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<sup>2</sup> Vicki Ruiz and Virginia Sánchez Korrol, Latina Legacies: Identity, Biography, and Community (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 211.

<sup>3</sup> Ruiz and Sanchez, Latina Legacies, 211.

<sup>4</sup> Michael McGerr, Of the People Vol. 2: A History of the United States, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018) 683.

Sotomayor's parents arrived in the 1940s. Sonia's mother, Celina Baez, served in the Women's Army Corps, and her father, Juan Luis Sotomayor, was a factory worker. The couple met in New York City, fell in love, married, and had two children. Like many immigrants, they found opportunities, separation, and discrimination in their new homes. Their native culture held them together. According to Virginia Sanchez-Korrol, "Through the creation of infant enclaves on the mainland, Puerto Rican migrants set about establishing communities which reflected those they left behind."<sup>5</sup> The Sotomayor family set out to begin their new life among people who spoke their language and shared the same cuisine and customs. They found such a community in the Bronx, New York.

Sonia was born in the Bronx, New York, on June 25, 1954. She grew up in the Bronxdale Houses, a housing project in an area plagued with drugs and violence. The neighborhood was a troubled area that forced Puerto Rican families like Sonia's to form solid cultural bonds of friendships. Her mother, Celina, improved her lot in life after her husband died despite a bout of clinical depression which afflicted her during the first year of widowhood. Sonia's father's battle with alcohol affected the household dynamics and created a tense atmosphere in the home. Sonia's mother tried her best, but the mother-daughter relationship was tense when Sonia was a child, prompting Sonia to take refuge in books and to spend much of her free time at the Parkchester Library.<sup>6</sup> Although it meant a substantial financial investment, Celina bought the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* for her children, which was rare in the neighborhood, and few people could afford it.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Virginia E Sánchez Korrol, From Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City (California: University of California Press, 1994) 5.

<sup>6</sup> Sonia Sotomayor, My Beloved World. A Memoir. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2013) 47.

<sup>7</sup> Antonia Felix, Sonia Sotomayor, True American Dream (New York: Berkley Books, 2011) 23.

Celina’s vision for her family paid off. Most importantly, at an early age, her mother instilled in Sotomayor and her brother a belief in the power of education. It was not by chance that her children completed their education and became productive members of society, unlike other children in the neighborhood who fell into the clutches of drugs and violence. Sonia and her brother received praise from their grandmother, aunts, and uncles for their dedication and commitment to education, which encouraged them. Reflecting on her parents, she says, “Despite having lost his chance for education, my father never resented my mother’s ambitions. On the contrary, he encouraged her.”<sup>8</sup>

Sonia succeeded in her schooling despite the tensions in the neighborhood. The family orientation toward success and Sotomayor's love for books made the difference during those years. Her family was not free from their share of illnesses, poverty, alcohol, and drug abuse. Her cousin Nelson died of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), which he got from an infected syringe.<sup>9</sup> Heroin addiction was one of the biggest problems in the project houses they called home, and the Sotomayor family was not spared. Sotomayor and her brother Juan, a physician, would become an exception to the children from the area and accomplished higher education thanks to their family's efforts.

Their mother had envisioned a life of professional accomplishments for her and her family. Celina also escaped an impoverished life. She lived in a rural area called Lajas in her native Puerto Rico and became an orphan at nine. Celina was raised by her older siblings and had to work as a young girl to help support her family.<sup>10</sup> She escaped from poverty by moving from

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<sup>8</sup> Sonia Sotomayor, *My Beloved World*, 62.

<sup>9</sup> “From the Bronx to the Bench: The Family Photos of Justice Sotomayor.” *NPR*, [apps.npr.org/sotomayor-family-photos](https://apps.npr.org/sotomayor-family-photos). Accessed 4 Apr. 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Sotomayor, 52.

Puerto Rico to New York as a young woman, which shows the character and strength she passed on to her children.

Juan found work in a factory while his wife Celina started working as a telephone operator at Prospect Hospital in the Longwood section of the South Bronx.<sup>11</sup> Celina's aspirations continued as she enrolled in nursing school at Hostos Community College after passing the General Education Development (GED) test.<sup>12</sup> After becoming a widow, she moved her children to Co-op City in the Bronx, a new development of apartment buildings in a better neighborhood than their former Bronxdale Houses.<sup>13</sup> As noted by Sotomayor, "My mother was eager to get us into a safer place because the Bronxdale projects were headed downhill fast."<sup>14</sup> The move to Co-op City, a new housing cooperative in the northeast Bronx, was significant, as it removed them from the immediate danger of the drug lords.

Buying shares in Co-op City was calculated according to income, making the new project affordable to low-income families.<sup>15</sup> The affordability and spaciousness of Co-op City proved to be heaven for Celina, and her children, who enjoyed the "grounds that were landscaped with trees and flowers, and the whole place was lit up at night."<sup>16</sup> The family of three adjusted well to their new neighborhood and conveniently, and Cardinal Spellman was within a mile walking distance, making it easier for a young Sotomayor to get to school.<sup>17</sup>

Although the family had lost the father and finances were scarce, adverse circumstances did not dictate Celina's choices to improve her and her children's life. As noted by Sotomayor in her candid memoir, "People who live in difficult circumstances need to know that happy endings

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<sup>11</sup> Antonia Felix, Sonia Sotomayor, True American Dream, 15.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>13</sup> Sotomayor, 99.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Felix, 29.

<sup>16</sup> Sotomayor, 100.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.



are possible.”<sup>18</sup> While the family of three continued to focus on education, Sonia sought a part-time job. “I started working at Zaro’s Bakery, in the small shopping center right across the street from our building in Co-op City,”<sup>19</sup> she says. Sotomayor developed discipline and ambition at a young age, illustrating that education, perseverance, and work ethics can take individuals to unimaginable places. The family influence also played an essential role in her character-building.

Her mother and paternal grandmother supported and encouraged her to be a good student. For Sonia’s mother, the public school system was not an option, and as a Roman Catholic, she preferred a Catholic education for her children.<sup>20</sup> As noted by Sotomayor, “Discipline was what made Catholic school a good investment in my mother’s eyes, worth the heavy burden of the tuition fees.”<sup>21</sup> Sotomayor attended Blessed Sacrament Elementary School in the Soundview section of the Bronx in New York City. The Sisters of Charity’s strict discipline intimidated Sotomayor, and she resented the physical punishment that was used to discipline the students. “I often stewed with righteous anger over physical punishments—my own or others’—especially when they seemed disproportionate to the crime.”<sup>22</sup> Although a practicing Catholic, she still pondered on the disparity of the Sisters’ teaching when it came to love and forgiveness.

Sonia took the Catholic High School entrance exam and finished her last year at Blessed Sacrament with the highest grades in her class.<sup>23</sup> In 1968, she was accepted into Cardinal Spellman High School, which is considered one of the top Catholic high schools in Bronx.<sup>24</sup> Cardinal Spellman’s Sisters of Charity’s rigorous academics prepared many students for college and professional schools. Motivated by her grammar teacher, she took an interest in learning

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., VIII.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Felix, 27.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Spanish. “My Spanish was so deficient that I wasn’t even pronouncing my own name,”<sup>25</sup> Sotomayor says. She went on to master the Spanish language while embracing her Puerto Rican roots with pride.

Although the school was segregated by gender when Sotomayor started, the school became coeducational in her sophomore year, allowing Sotomayor to befriend boys and girls alike.<sup>26</sup> One of the boys she befriended was Kevin Noonan, her first boyfriend and, later, her husband. As noted by Antonia Felix, “Even though Sonia was in love, she did not get distracted from her classes, debate meets, or work with the Latino organization ASPIRA.”<sup>27</sup> In 1972, Sotomayor graduated as valedictorian.

Her health challenges came from juvenile diabetes, diagnosed when she was seven. She learned to administer the insulin prescribed by the doctors to herself when her parents could not do it. At that time, the disease was scary for her family, and her parents disagreed on who should inject her, which prompted her to do it herself.<sup>28</sup> She handled the sterilization of the syringes and injected the insulin into herself, demonstrating her capacity to take charge even at such an early age. Her paternal grandmother blamed Celina’s family for the illness. Diabetes “runs in families, *como una maldición*,” her grandmother said and added, “This curse is from Celina's side, for sure, not ours.”<sup>29</sup> The juvenile diabetes diagnosis proved to be troublesome for the family. Still, Sotomayor understood what she needed to do to control her diabetes, demonstrating a maturity beyond her years. Sonia's early years with a severe health challenge did

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>26</sup> Sotomayor, 89.

<sup>27</sup> Felix, 33.

<sup>28</sup> Sotomayor, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Sotomayor, 7.

not deter her from obtaining her high school diploma, attending college, and graduating with honors.

Sotomayor's warmth and sense of community started early in her life in the Bronx at Blessed Sacrament. Gilmar, her best friend in elementary school who also attended Blessed Sacrament, announced that his family was moving to California. Sonia said, "Gilmar, you have to say goodbye to everybody. Everybody! Come on, I'll go with you."<sup>30</sup> Sonia kept her word and took her friend on a farewell neighborhood tour. They made several stops to say goodbye, including the nuns at Blessed Sacrament, her family, the street vendors, and just anyone they encountered on the way.<sup>31</sup> Sotomayor's understanding of community can be attributed to her grandmother Mercedes who kept the family together in cultural gatherings at her house.

The family social gatherings included food, music, dance, poetry, and games. Reminiscing about her grandmother, she says, "I have come to believe that in order to thrive, a child must have at least one adult in her life who shows her unconditional love, respect, and confidence. For me it was Abuelita."<sup>32</sup> Justice Sotomayor has kept the concept through her involvement with young people. She is part of the Development School for Youth (DSY) program, which aims to encourage inner-city students to follow their dreams.<sup>33</sup> The program teaches children how to function in a professional work setting. There is no doubt that Sotomayor is a role model for students and young people living at a socioeconomic disadvantage and who might feel confused about their future.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>33</sup> "Development School for Youth." *All Stars Project, Inc.*, <https://allstars.org/programs/dsy/>.

## Chapter II: Higher Education: Golden Opportunities

Sotomayor's achievement of the "American Dream" was earned by hard work, intelligence, and perseverance. Although she was born in a disadvantaged household, she attended Princeton and Yale, two of the most exclusive universities in the United States. Some argue that affirmative action was partly responsible for her academic success, but Sotomayor possessed many self-promoting qualities that were noted by her professors. According to Antonia Felix, "Sotomayor readily admits that she entered Princeton through affirmative action, but a close look at admissions policies at the time reveals that she had to make an extraordinary impression on the admissions committee to pass through the rigid policy guidelines"<sup>34</sup> Even though she was a beneficiary of Affirmative Action, much credit was given to her achievements in high school which were considered in the admission process.

Affirmative Action was first used in 1935 under the Wagner Act, a federal law that gave federal workers the right to form joint unions. President John F. Kennedy linked the term to a policy meant to advance racial equality. Affirmative Action is a controversial law in the United States.<sup>35</sup> Supporters of the law assert that it promotes equality and representation for socio-economically disadvantaged groups that have faced historical discrimination or oppression. At the same time, the opponents argue that it is a form of reverse discrimination that benefits the most privileged within minority groups at the expense of the least fortunate within a majority group.<sup>36</sup> They add that it can hinder minority students by placing them in courses too difficult for them, although affirmative action policies ensure equal representation of minorities.<sup>37</sup> Motivated

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<sup>34</sup> Felix, 38.

<sup>35</sup> "The Case for Affirmative Action," Harvard Graduate School of Education, <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/18/07/case-affirmative-action>.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> "The Case for Affirmative Action," <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/18/07/case-affirmative-action>.

by her friend, Kevin K. Moy, a Cardinal Spellman classmate, she was encouraged to apply to Princeton by seeking scholarships, financial aid, and a work-study program. Sotomayor followed her friend's suggestion.<sup>38</sup> She was accepted to Princeton University and majored in history.<sup>39</sup>

Although her friend believed that Sotomayor had the potential to succeed at Princeton if she was accepted, he warned her that “social isolation is going to be a part of your experience, and you have to have the strength of character to get through intact.”<sup>40</sup> Still, her drive and openness to seek help ultimately influenced her success at Princeton which had just begun to accept Puerto Rican students a few years before her 1972 first year.<sup>41</sup> As a full scholarship, recipient, she put long hours into her studies and took advantage of several opportunities, including having access to tutors, which helped her excel.<sup>42</sup> In 1976, Sonia graduated summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa from Princeton University with a degree in history and received the M. Taylor Pyne Prize, awarded to one or two students yearly.<sup>43</sup> The M. Taylor Pyne Prize is the highest academic honor Princeton awards to an undergraduate.<sup>44</sup>

At Princeton, Sotomayor felt the disparity of her humble upbringing in comparison to some of her classmates who described a different lifestyle. Sotomayor’s said, “Whenever I felt out of place or homesick, I took refuge at Firestone Library. Books had seen me through an earlier time of trouble, and their presence all around me was both a comfort and an answer to the question of why I had come here.”<sup>45</sup> Just like when her father died, books were Sotomayor's refuge again, and they helped her adjust at Princeton. During her years at Princeton, Sotomayor

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<sup>38</sup> Sotomayor, 117.

<sup>39</sup> Felix, 43.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Sotomayor, 128.

took advantage of counseling, mentorship, and friendships. These qualities followed her to Yale, her career in law, and the Supreme Court, where she befriended the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and other justices.<sup>46</sup>

While at Princeton, she joined the *Acción Puertorriqueña*, the Latino student group, and became its co-chair.<sup>47</sup> She joined the group during her sophomore year and felt empowered by the support she received from other students of like-mindedness, especially her friend Margarita Rosa who invited her to join the group.<sup>48</sup> “Coming from a poor neighborhood of Brooklyn and a traditionally conservative Puerto Rican family herself, Margarita understood instinctively the path I had traveled to Princeton,”<sup>49</sup> Sotomayor remarks. The association empowered Sotomayor, and she found a call to serve her community at Princeton. “I could see that troubling the waters was occasionally necessary to bring attention to the urgency of some problem,”<sup>50</sup> Sotomayor said as she sought to obtain changes for minority students.<sup>51</sup> “It was at Princeton that I became truly aware of my Latina identity—an awareness that has shaped the course of my life,”<sup>52</sup> Sotomayor said.

Her involvement in Princeton’s Latino activism resulted in hiring Hispanic staff members at Princeton and including Puerto Rican history in its curriculum.<sup>53</sup> In addition, Sotomayor’s militancy resulted in hiring an assistant dean of student affairs whose role was to advocate for Latino students.<sup>54</sup> Her enthusiasm for Puerto Rico’s history led her to conduct a family oral

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<sup>46</sup> “Justice Sotomayor Reveals Her Nickname for Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.” *YouTube*, YouTube, 4 Sept. 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MIDK0GR3RtU>.

<sup>47</sup> Sotomayor, 148.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>52</sup> Felix, 37.

<sup>53</sup> Sotomayor, 147.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

history project which she presented in a paper for her history course. She also chose to write about Luis Muñoz Marín, who in 1948 became Puerto Rico's first elected governor. He remained governor of the island until 1964.<sup>55</sup> Sotomayor continued her passion for sociocultural affairs that pertained to her community, including organizing a group of volunteers to assist non-English speaking patients at Trenton Psychiatric Hospital.<sup>56</sup>

Attracted by a headline in the local newspaper, she organized a group of bilingual student volunteers from the Acción Puertorriqueña group to work with Spanish-speaking patients at Trenton Psychiatric Hospital.<sup>57</sup> “When I called the hospital and asked some questions, I found that there were a number of long-term patients who spoke no English and had only intermittent access to Spanish-speaking staff,”<sup>58</sup> she writes. The satisfaction she received from her community service at Trenton helped her awaken the desire to continue in public service.<sup>59</sup>

Sotomayor's involvement with the Latino community at Princeton did not stop her from participating in the larger community's activities. “I would warn any minority student today against the temptations of self-segregation: take support and comfort from your own group as you can, but don't hide within it,”<sup>60</sup> she notes. She was an active participant in the activities of the Third World Center, a building that serves as the headquarters and party center for all minority student groups at Princeton. In her effort to mingle with other minorities, she ran and won a position on the governance board to run the facility and became the first non-black elected to run the open section usually filled by African Americans.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> “The Oxford Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas in the United States.” *Oxford Reference*, Oxford University Press, “Puerto Rican Forum.” Essay, Volume 3, 492–93.

[www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195156003.001.0001/acref-9780195156003](http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195156003.001.0001/acref-9780195156003).

<sup>56</sup> Sotomayor, 159.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

As with Princeton, fate brought Sotomayor to Yale University through a friend she accompanied to Yale and who introduced her to Professor Jose Cabranes, a Puerto Rican attorney and Yale's general counsel. Cabranes, a founder of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund (PRLDEF), “was a trailblazer and a hero to many for his work promoting civil rights for Hispanics.”<sup>62</sup> Professor Cabranes encouraged Sotomayor to apply to Yale. He guaranteed to hire her as a research assistant for the study on the history of Puerto Rico he conducted.<sup>63</sup> Professor Cabranes became her mentor.

While at Yale, she continued advocating for minority students by joining the Latin, Asian, and Native American Students Association (LANA).<sup>64</sup> Sotomayor found like-minded people and a support system in LANA. Referring to her friends at LANA, she said, “We worked hard, we studied hard, we partied very hard.”<sup>65</sup> She became the editor for the Yale Law Journal, which helped her achieve an affinity with Yale, rekindling her childhood dream of becoming a judge, but she still had some hesitation. As Sonia reported, “The relative scarcity of women on the bench and the practical nonexistence of Latinas also gave me a reason to keep this idea in the drawer with other idle wishes, any expression of which would have marked me a delusional.”<sup>66</sup> Despite this setback, she still chased her dreams.

At Yale, she advocated for the inclusion of minorities in the hiring of staff.<sup>67</sup> As noted by Felix, “Sonia found a support system at Yale that allowed her to continue the commitment to recruiting and celebrating minority students that she had developed at Princeton.”<sup>68</sup> In addition, her enthusiasm for writing on Puerto Rico’s statehood and economic situation gave her much

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>64</sup> Felix, 60.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Sotomayor, 186.

<sup>67</sup> Felix, 60.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.



notoriety at Yale. Her research on seabed rights was published in *The Yale Law Journal*, giving Sotomayor an unmistakable standing mark.<sup>69</sup> As in Princeton, she brought the same determination to Yale University and graduated in 1979 with a Juris Doctor degree. That same year, she passed the bar exam.<sup>70</sup>

Her desire to marry became a reality in her first year at Yale. On August 14, 1976, Sotomayor married her high school sweetheart, Kevin Noonan, at the Lady Chapel at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City.<sup>71</sup> She adapted her husband's last name into her own—which is a common practice in Hispanic marriages—and became Sonia Sotomayor de Noonan.<sup>72</sup> After seven years, however, the marriage dissolved, and they were divorced amicably. Sotomayor has remained unmarried after multiple attempts at dating.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 179-180.

<sup>70</sup> Felix, 77.

<sup>71</sup> Sotomayor, 168.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Felix, 203.

### Chapter III: Career in Law

After graduating from Yale Law School, Sotomayor joined the New York District Attorney's office which was headed by the legendary Robert Morgenthau, whom she met at a recruiting event at Yale. Morgenthau offered her the position of Assistant District Attorney (ADA) She accepted even though among Yale graduates the position was not the most appealing because it was considered a low-paying job.<sup>74</sup> For Sotomayor public service was more important than money. She said, "But my starting salary will would still be more than what my mother has ever made as a nurse, which to Titi Aurora, who worked as a seamstress, had always seemed lavish."<sup>75</sup> The salary was still attractive for Sotomayor and the job offered the right experience for the young attorney.

In 1979, when she started her job in the DA's office, New York City was experiencing a record crime wave. As noted by Antonia Felix, "During Sonia's first year at the DA's office, the number of felony crimes in the city increased by nearly 19 percent for a total of over 407,000, and the use of handguns during serious crimes rose by a record-breaking 31.9 percent."<sup>76</sup> This rise in crime was primarily attributed to the drug trafficking of cocaine from drug cartels and of heroin that plagued New York City in the 1980s.

Drugs came to the city from the Medellin drug cartel in Colombia and from places as far as Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Turkey. "Mayor Ed Koch had been elected two years before on a promise to restore order after a summer of widespread looting, vandalism, and arson triggered by a ten-day blackout,"<sup>77</sup> Sotomayor says. The flood of cocaine and heroin prompted

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<sup>74</sup> Sotomayor, 194.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Felix, 80.

<sup>77</sup> Sotomayor, 196.

the “Just Say No”<sup>78</sup> national campaign against drugs implemented in the 1980s under President Ronald Reagan and led by First Lady Nancy Reagan.<sup>79</sup> The campaign became a symbol of the fight against drugs of that era.

Sotomayor stayed in the DA’s office for five years. She left in 1984 at age 30 to join a private law firm.<sup>80</sup> Sotomayor joined the law firm Pavia and Harcourt in 1984, as a general civil litigator involved in all areas of commercial law.<sup>81</sup> She became a partner in 1988. They specialized in law pertaining to real estate, employment, banking, contracts, and agency law. The firm also dealt with intellectual property law, including trademarks, copyrights, and unfair competition issues. George Pavia, the managing partner, remembers being instantly impressed with the young Sonia Sotomayor when he hired her in 1984, noting that “she was just ideal for us in terms of her background and training.”<sup>82</sup>

On August 12, 1992, President George H.W. Bush nominated Sotomayor to the United States District Court of the Southern District of New York following Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s recommendation of Sotomayor for the bench. President Bush had announced his decision to nominate Sotomayor in 1991, but delays in the Senate pushed her nomination back. “The eighteen months that it took my nomination to clear were an education in the arts of politics and patience,” she says.<sup>83</sup> The hearing began in June 1992, and Sotomayor made an excellent impression on the committee through her pro bono activities, her duties with the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund, the New York City Campaign Fund, the Maternity Center

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<sup>78</sup> “Nancy Reagan Introduces ‘Just Say No’ Campaign Channel.” *History.Com*, [www.history.com/speeches/nancy-reagan-introduces-just-say-no-campaign](http://www.history.com/speeches/nancy-reagan-introduces-just-say-no-campaign). Accessed 19 May 2023.

<sup>79</sup> “Just Say No.” Campaign Channel. *History.Com*

<sup>80</sup> “The Supreme Court: Justice Sonia Sotomayor.” *Supreme Court Historical Society*, 28 Mar. 2022, <https://supremecourthistory.org/supreme-court-justices/associate-justice-sonia-sotomayor/>.

<sup>81</sup> “The Supreme Court.”

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Sotomayor, 192.

Association of the State of New York, and other activities. She took the oath on October 2, 1992. Her confirmation made her the first Hispanic American federal judge in the history of New York. In addition, she became one of seven women among the district's fifty-eight judges who have served in this court.<sup>84</sup> Sotomayor served in the Southern District Court of New York until 1997.

One of her memorable decisions on this bench was the 1995 ruling in favor of baseball players who had gone on strike against the owners for disagreements in their collective bargaining union. Sotomayor's ruling ended the 232-day strike, the longest in baseball history. She has been praised as saving baseball and was invited to pitch the first ball at the Yankee Stadium in her native Bronx, New York.<sup>85</sup>

Sotomayor's next judicial call will come from President Bill Clinton in 1997 when she was nominated by President Bill Clinton for the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit. She held this position from 1997 to 2009. As noted by biographer Antonia Felix, "The Second Circuit is known as a 'hot bench,' a court in which judges ask a lot of questions, and the style of the court matched Sotomayor's perfectly."<sup>86</sup> While in the Second Circuit, Judge Sotomayor ruled in several First Amendment cases including the *Ford v. McGinnis* (2003), a case involving a Muslim inmate suing for his rights to observe a religious holiday.<sup>87</sup> The district court assigned to the case had ruled that the inmate's First Amendment rights had not been violated. According to Felix, "Sotomayor's opinion reversed that decision, holding that the inmate's First Amendment rights were violated because the feast was subjectively important to

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<sup>84</sup> "The Supreme Court."

<sup>85</sup> "Sotomayor Throws out First Pitch." *YouTube*, YouTube, 26 Sept. 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yEq0OJo8y4U>. Accessed 29 April 2023.

<sup>86</sup> Felix, 198.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

the inmate's practice of Islam."<sup>88</sup> Sotomayor's experience of the law and persuasion skills helped the case and a decision in favor for the inmate was obtained.

At the same time, Sotomayor taught at New York University (NYU) and Columbia University between 1998 and 2007.<sup>89</sup> As noted by Felix, "Judge Sotomayor's love of teaching is an extension of her fervor for drawing young people to the law, a quality that also manifested in the significant number of speeches she presented at colleges and law schools throughout the country."<sup>90</sup> Sotomayor has also lectured at the University of Puerto Rico, the University of Indiana Law School, Pepperdine University, and Syracuse University.<sup>91</sup>

The pinnacle of her career came in 2009 when President Obama nominated her to the U.S. Supreme Court. She was subjected to intense grilling by the Senate during the hearings. A *The New York Times* editorial noted, "Unfortunately, several Republican senators began the hearings by suggesting that Judge Sotomayor is biased because of her ethnicity, gender and background."<sup>92</sup> In the same editorial, "the notion of Sotomayor having empathy, which Republicans are trying to turn into a dirty word"<sup>93</sup> was also addressed.

In addition, a comment she made about a Latina judge's unique insights raised some controversy. Another *New York Times* editorial states, "The first Hispanic nominee to the court [Supreme Court] is being called racist. She is being attacked as not smart enough, as too abrasive."<sup>94</sup> Judge Sotomayor made some comments in a speech in 2001 about hoping that a

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> The Supreme Court.

<sup>90</sup> Felix, 205.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> "Questioning Judge Sotomayor." *New York Times (1923-)*, Jul 14, 2009, p. 1. *ProQuest*. Web. 17 May 2023. <https://ezproxy.purchase.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fhistorical-newspapers%2Fquestioning-judge-sotomayor%2Fdocview%2F1030614585%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14171>.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> "Judging Sonia Sotomayor." *New York Times (1923-)*, May 31, 2009, p. 1. *ProQuest*. Web. 17 May 2023. <https://ezproxy.purchase.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fhistorical-newspapers%2Fjudging-sonia-sotomayor%2Fdocview%2F1030663125%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14171>.

“wise Latina woman with the richness of her experiences would more often than not reach a better conclusion than a white male who hasn’t lived that life.”<sup>95</sup> Her speech stirred up some talking points on conservative senators. Still, she had the support of most of the Senate. Sotomayor held her ground and became a Supreme Court Justice.

The Supreme Court first assembled on February 1, 1790, in the Exchange Building in New York City—then the Nation’s Capital. Although the Court was originally supposed to be composed of six members, the number of Justices changed several times before settling at the present total of nine in 1869.<sup>96</sup> As noted by an editorial of the *Washington Post*, “Senator Wilson, of Iowa, introduced a bill having for its purpose the reorganization of the Supreme Court of the United States. It provides that the Supreme Court of the United States shall consist of a Chief Justice and nine Associate Justices.”<sup>97</sup>

Sandra Day O'Connor was the first woman appointed, serving from 1981 to 2006. In 1993, Ruth Bader Ginsburg was appointed, where she served until her death on September 18, 2020.<sup>98</sup> The appointment of these two women marked a turning point for the judiciary and opened the door for changes in the election of other Supreme Court justices. Although the first two female justices made history, the third one also broke class and ethnicity barriers in the Supreme Court as a Latina.<sup>99</sup> Sotomayor became the third woman and the first member of a minority group to join the Supreme Court.

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<sup>95</sup> “Judging Sonia Sotomayor.” *New York Times*.

<sup>96</sup> “Supreme Court of the United States.” *History and Traditions*.

<https://www.supremecourt.gov/about/historyandtraditions.aspx>. Accessed 18 May 2023.

<sup>97</sup> “THE SUPREME COURT.: SENATOR WILSON INTRODUCES A BILL FOR ITS RECOGNIZATION.” *The Washington Post (1877-1922)*, Jan 21, 1886, p. 2. *ProQuest*. Web. 10 May 2023.

<https://ezproxy.purchase.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fhistorical-newspapers%2Fsupreme-court%2Fdocview%2F138064234%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14171>.

<sup>98</sup> “Justices.” *Supreme Court of the United States*.

<sup>99</sup> “Background on Judge Sonia Sotomayor.” *National Archives and Records Administration*, National Archives and Records Administration, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/background-judge-sonia-sotomayor>. Accessed 4 May 2023.

President Barack Obama nominated her after thirteen years without any female nominee. Her three decades of distinguished achievements in multiple areas of the legal profession made her an ideal candidate for the position. According to journalists Jonathan Martin and Mike Allen, “As a prosecutor, litigator and trial and appellate judge, Sotomayor brings more federal judicial experience to the Supreme Court than any justice in 100 years, and more overall judicial experience than anyone confirmed for the Court in the past 70 years.”<sup>100</sup> The nomination marked the remarkable rise of a Latina from the South Bronx to the highest court of the United States and marked an unprecedented advancement for Latinas and women of color. Sotomayor became an instant icon and an example of the transforming power of education.

Sotomayor replaced Justice David Souter and was the first appointee by a Democratic president in fifteen years. Sotomayor’s nomination was submitted to the United States Senate on June 1 and confirmed August 6, 2009, by a vote of sixty-eight in favor and thirty-one against. She was sworn in by Chief Justice John Roberts on August 8. During her swearing in ceremony, Senator Chuck s Schumer stated:

“Judge Sotomayor’s story is a great American story as well. Consider this: in no other country in the world could a woman from a minority group who grew up in a working-class family have received an education at the best institutions and, having thrived there, gone on to be a judge and now a nominee to the highest court in the land.”<sup>101</sup>

Once she joined the Supreme Court, Sotomayor particularly stood out in her opinions regarding Fourth Amendment cases. David L. Hudson, Jr. noted, “Sotomayor's influence on the Court has been profound. She is a consistent defender of constitutional freedoms and individual rights.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> “How, Why Obama Picked Sotomayor.” *POLITICO*, <https://www.politico.com/story/2009/05/how-why-obama-picked-sotomayor-022970>.

<sup>101</sup> *Confirmation Hearing on the Nomination of Hon. Sonia Sotomayor, to Be an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States*, govInfo, 2010, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-111shrg56940/html/CHRG-111shrg56940.htm>.

<sup>102</sup> David L. Hudson Jr., “Justice Sonia Sotomayor: The Court’s Premier Defender of the Fourth Amendment,” *Seattle University Law Review* 44, NO. 19 (2020): 19-34. <https://repository.belmont.edu/lawfaculty>.

The cases include tribal hunting treaties, lethal injection, the death penalty, free speech, preferential selection based on sex or race, and abortion laws. The latter has been a topic of much discussion since the Supreme Court overturn of *Roe v. Wade* in the nation on June 24, 2022, which ended “fifty years of abortion rights.”<sup>103</sup> The latter has raised much controversy in the country, and Sotomayor, a liberal, warned against the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*.

Regarding her relationship with other Supreme Court justices, *The New York Times* correspondent Adam Liptak wrote that Sotomayor described her friendship with Thomas and said, “I suspect I have probably disagreed with him more than with any other justice.”<sup>104</sup> Justice Sotomayor claims that her interactions with Justice Thomas have been instructive and friendly which raised some negative comments from people who disagree with Justice Thomas’s stand on abortion.

Sotomayor has taken the lead as a dissenter in cases with a conservative approach. As noted by Bloomberg Law senior reporter Lydia Wheeler, “She has made very clear that she is committed to being the voice of reason, to being a truth teller, administering justice without respect to persons, and giving equal rights to the poor and the rich.”<sup>105</sup> In the article *Sotomayor Takes the Lead*, Lisa Eskow, co-director of the Supreme Court Clinic at the University of Texas School of Law, states, “I view Justice Sotomayor as playing an incredibly important and probably increasingly important role on the court.”<sup>106</sup> There is no doubt that as a liberal justice,

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<sup>103</sup> Ending 50 Years of Abortion Rights. *Boston University*, 24 June 2022, <https://www.bu.edu/articles/2022/supreme-court-overturns-roe-v-wade/>.

<sup>104</sup> Adam Liptak, “Sotomayor Says Supreme Court Can Regain the Public's Confidence,” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 16 June 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/16/us/sonia-sotomayor-supreme-court.html>.

<sup>105</sup> Lydia Wheeler, “Sotomayor Takes Lead as Dissenter for Embattled Liberal Justices,” *Bloomberg Law*, 5 July 2022, <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/us-law-week/sotomayor-takes-lead-as-dissenter-for-embattled-liberal-justices>.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*



Sotomayor's opinions are crucial, especially because conservative justices are the majority in the Supreme Court.

## Chapter IV: Sotomayor as a Supreme Court of Justice

As a Supreme Court Justice, Sotomayor has developed a strong record of decisions backing rights for minorities. She has consistently dissented in cases where she perceives that the Constitutional rights of individuals have been violated. One such case was *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015)<sup>107</sup> which argued for the legalization of same-sex marriage in all 50 states. Before the ruling, HR 3396 Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) stated that “no State, territory, or possession of the United States or Indian tribe shall be required to give effect to any marriage between persons of the same sex under the laws of any other such jurisdiction or to any right or claim arising from such relationship.”<sup>108</sup> It also established the federal definition of marriage as “only a legal union between one man and one woman as husband and wife” and spouse “as only a person of the opposite sex who is a husband or wife.”<sup>109</sup> It also gave the states the right to create an alternative definition of marriage if they chose to do so.

The Court found in favor of the legalization of gay marriage and the demise of DOMA. The five to four decision was supported by Justices Anthony Kennedy, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Stephen G. Breyer, Elena Kagan, and Sonia Sotomayor. The majority opinion was written by Justice Kennedy and joined by Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Stephen Breyer, Elena Kagan, and Sonia Sotomayor. They wrote,

“DOMA instructs all federal officials, and indeed all persons with whom same-sex couples interact, including their children, that their marriage is less worthy than the marriages of others. The federal statute is invalid, for no legitimate purpose overcomes the purpose and effect to disparage and to injure those whom the State, by its marriage laws, sought to protect in personhood and dignity. The federal statute violates the Fifth Amendment by seeking to displace this protection and treating those persons as living in

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<sup>107</sup> “*Obergefell v. Hodges*.” *Ballotpedia*, [ballotpedia.org/Obergefell v. Hodges](https://ballotpedia.org/Obergefell_v._Hodges). Accessed 26 May 2023.

[https://ballotpedia.org/Obergefell v. Hodges](https://ballotpedia.org/Obergefell_v._Hodges).

<sup>108</sup> “*Obergefell v. Hodges*.” *Ballotpedia*.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*.

marriages less respected than others. This opinion and its holding are confined to those lawful marriages.”<sup>110</sup>

Justice Sotomayor has become a defender of the Fourth Amendment and the values it protects for the American people. In a number of instances, she sided with the minority, which was the case with *Schuette v. Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action* (2014).<sup>111</sup> Justice Sotomayor wrote the dissent in a seven to two decision to uphold a Michigan constitutional amendment to ban any preferential selection based on sex or race, also known as affirmative action.<sup>112</sup> Justice Sotomayor wrote,

“The effect of 26 is that a white graduate of a public Michigan university who wishes to pass his historical privilege on to his children may freely lobby the board of that university in favor of an expanded legacy admissions policy, whereas a black Michigander who was denied the opportunity to attend that very university cannot lobby the board in favor of a policy that might give his children a chance that he never had and that they might never have absent that policy.”<sup>113</sup>

Such liberal stances earned Sotomayor much approval from liberal and left partisans. Sotomayor's 2009-23 Martin-Quinn scores, a set of metrics that creates a political profile of each justice, indicate that Sotomayor is the most liberal justice on the court.<sup>114</sup> According to Statista, she took the lead following the 2021-2022 term with a -4.14 score, making her the most liberal justice on the court at that time.<sup>115</sup> In contrast, For the 2021-2022 Supreme Court term, Justice Clarence Thomas scored 3.83. The Martin-Quinn scores method ranked him as the most conservative justice.<sup>116</sup> Martin-Quinn scores were developed by political scientists Andrew Martin and Kevin Quinn from the University of Michigan and measure the judges of the

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> “Sonia Sotomayor.” *Schuette v. Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action*. *Ballotpedia*, [https://ballotpedia.org/Sonia\\_Sotomayor#Schuette\\_v.\\_Coalition\\_to\\_Defend\\_Affirmative\\_Action](https://ballotpedia.org/Sonia_Sotomayor#Schuette_v._Coalition_to_Defend_Affirmative_Action).

<sup>112</sup> “Sonia Sotomayor.” *Schuette v. Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action*.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Supreme Court Justices Ideological Scores U.S. 2021 Published by Statista Research Department. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1323015/supreme-court-justices-ideological-scores-us/>

<sup>116</sup> Supreme Court Justices Ideological Scores U.S. 2021. THIS ISNT A COMPLETE CITATION

Supreme Court along an ideological continuum. The further from zero on the scale, the more conservative (>0) or liberal (<0) the justice.<sup>117</sup>

Another dissenting opinion she authored was in *Berghuis v. Thompkins* (2010)<sup>118</sup> which involved the rights of individuals arrested by the police, given the proper *Miranda* warnings, and understanding their right to remain silent yet speak anyway. The decision states that an individual does not invoke his or her right to silence by remaining silent and must affirmatively state they are relying on the right. Sotomayor dissented on this major decision saying that *Miranda* rules and protections have always required more to have a valid waiver of such rights. As noted by Professor Rachel Barkow, “Justice Sotomayor dissent shows a detailed appreciation for the reality of how the police and suspects are likely to behave in this setting.”<sup>119</sup> A Michigan state court had convicted Van Chester Thompkins of first-degree murder, assault with intent to commit murder, and several firearms-related charges. After exhausting his remedies in Michigan state court, Thompkins petitioned for habeas corpus relief in a Michigan federal district court. The district court denied the petition. The Court reasoned that Mr. Thompkins waived his *Miranda* right to remain silent when he “knowingly and voluntarily” made a statement to the police. The Court further held that, even if Mr. Thompkins' counsel was ineffective, he could not show he was prejudiced by counsel's deficient performance – a prerequisite to establishing that his Sixth Amendment right was violated. Justice Sonia Sotomayor, joined by Justices John Paul Stevens, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and Stephen G. Breyer, dissented.<sup>120</sup> She

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Rachel E. Barkow, “Justice Sotomayor and Criminal Justice in the Real World.” *The Yale Law Journal - Home*, [www.yalelawjournal.org/forum/justice-sotomayor-and-criminal-justice-in-the-real-world](http://www.yalelawjournal.org/forum/justice-sotomayor-and-criminal-justice-in-the-real-world). Accessed 26 May 2023.

<sup>119</sup> “Justice Sotomayor and Criminal Justice in the Real World.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

reprimanded the majority for retreating from the broad protections afforded by *Miranda*, stating that now a criminal suspect waives his rights simply by uttering a “few one-word responses.”<sup>121</sup>

Another case Fourth Amendment in which Sotomayor dissented was *Utah v. Strieff* (2016).<sup>122</sup> Police arrested Strieff after he refused to produce identification and discovered there was a warrant for his arrest due to a parking violation. Furthermore, the officer found illegal drugs on Strieff. Justice Sotomayor considered the search and arrest to be unlawful. Sotomayor wrote in this case that “The Court today holds that the discovery of a warrant for an unpaid parking ticket will forgive a police officer’s violation of your Fourth Amendment rights.” She continued: “This case allows the police to stop you on the street, demand your identification, and check it for outstanding traffic warrants—even if you are doing nothing wrong.”<sup>123</sup> Her dissent received much media attention, particularly for its citation to prominent Black political thinkers and its evocations of Black Lives Matter. Journalist Damon Root interprets Justice Sotomayor's dissent as constructing an emergent legal theory that incorporates Black Lives Matter and the experiences of people of color subject to being stopped and searched into the core of Fourth Amendment jurisprudence.<sup>124</sup>

Sotomayor wrote another minority dissent in the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* (2022) case, which could be said to be one of the most controversial and impactful Supreme Court cases in decades.<sup>125</sup> The decision overturned the longstanding Constitutional right to abortion established in 1973 under *Roe v. Wade*, and it eliminated federal standards on

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> David L. Hudson Jr., “Justice Sonia Sotomayor: The Court’s Premier Defender of the Fourth Amendment,” Seattle University Law Review 44, NO. 19 (2020): 19-34. <https://repository.belmont.edu/lawfaculty>.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Damon Root, “Sonia Sotomayor Stands up for the Fourth Amendment.” *Reason.Com*, 1 July 2016, reason.com. <https://reason.com/2016/07/01/sonia-sotomayor-stands-up-for-the-fourth>.

<sup>125</sup> Adam Liptak, "In 6-3 Ruling, Supreme Court Ends nearly 50 Years of Abortion Rights." *New York Times*, Late Edition (East Coast) ed., 24 Jun 2022, *ProQuest*. Web. 5 May 2023. [https://suny-pur.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01SUNY\\_PUR/1vku4dk/cdi\\_proquest\\_newspapers\\_2680425718](https://suny-pur.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01SUNY_PUR/1vku4dk/cdi_proquest_newspapers_2680425718).

abortion access that earlier decisions had established, paving a path for dozens of states to ban the procedure. With a six to three decision, Sotomayor was joined in her dissenting opinion by Justices Stephen Breyer and Elena Kagan Arguing that “Whatever the exact scope of the coming laws, one result of today’s decision is certain: the curtailment of women’s rights, and of their status as free and equal citizens...The Constitution will, today’s majority holds, provide no shield, despite its guarantees of liberty and equality for all.”<sup>126</sup> response to the As noted by Adam Liptak, Supreme Court correspondent, the Justices wrote, “With sorrow—for this court, but more, for the many millions of American women who have today lost a fundamental constitutional protection—we dissent.”<sup>127</sup> Sotomayor went on to say, “Respecting a woman as an autonomous being, and granting her full equality, meant giving her substantial choice over this most personal and most consequential of all life decisions.”<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization  
[https://ballotpedia.org/Dobbs v. Jackson Women%E2%80%99s Health Organization](https://ballotpedia.org/Dobbs_v._Jackson_Women%E2%80%99s_Health_Organization).

<sup>127</sup> Liptak, “Supreme Court Ends nearly 50 Years of Abortion Rights.”

<sup>128</sup> Ending 50 Years of Abortion Rights. *Boston University*, 24 June 2022,  
<https://www.bu.edu/articles/2022/supreme-court-overturns-roe-v-wade/>.

## Chapter V: Assessing An Iconic Figure

Sonia Sotomayor is among the judiciary's highest-ranking Latinos in the United States. Her accomplishments and rise to the pinnacle of American public life herald a profound cultural and historical shift. For many, Sotomayor's ascent represented the elusive fulfillment of the American dream. The significance of Sotomayor's achievements has placed Latinas, specifically Puerto Rican women, in the center of American historical development.

Sotomayor's Puerto Rican roots have been credited by many as a key influence in her life. Historian Virginia E. Sanchez Korrol states, "Puerto Ricans are one of the most studied groups in American society."<sup>129</sup> Still, Puerto Ricans have been marginalized and have suffered discrimination, but regardless of that, many have risen to success in society, owing their accomplishments to the power of education. Justice Sotomayor explains, "I came to accept during my freshman year [at Princeton] that many of the gaps in my knowledge and understanding were simply limits of class and cultural background, not lack of aptitude or application as I'd feared."<sup>130</sup> As noted by biographer Antonia Felix, "Her friends and professors witnessed the development of her identity into a confident Nuyorican who could appreciate her heritage rather than shrink from it when integrating into the larger world."<sup>131</sup> Sotomayor's ambition, emotional intelligence, perfect timing, and accumulation of legal experience have played a role in her career.

Sotomayor's intelligence, persistence, and work ethic have helped her break many barriers. Some people believe that she exemplifies passion, strength, and perseverance that women of different ethnicities and social classes can emulate. "Sotomayor learned to build

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<sup>129</sup> Sanchez Korrol, *From Colonia to Community*, XVIII.

<sup>130</sup> Sotomayor, 135.

<sup>131</sup> Felix, 53.

coalitions, to persuade others to live up to their values and to use the law as an instrument of social change,” Felix says.<sup>132</sup> Sotomayor’s story is an example of the American Dream primarily achieved by those who work hard.

Sotomayor's life story can inspire all Americans but especially people who feel marginalized due to ethnicity or socioeconomic status. Sonia Sotomayor's success as a lawyer, judge, and Supreme Court Justice has been marked by ambition and perseverance. “Who I am as a human being will, I hope, continue to evolve as well, but perhaps the essence is defined by now,”<sup>133</sup> she says. Sotomayor has maintained a focus on issues of gender and ethnicity. She is sought after for commencement addresses at universities including Yale, her alma mater.<sup>134</sup> On January 20, 2021, Sotomayor administered the oath of office to Vice President- elect Kamala Harris in a ceremony that made history.<sup>135</sup> Harris became the first female and first woman of color to become vice president.<sup>136</sup>

Amidst her jurisprudential achievements, she has maintained her attachment to her native Latino culture. With all her success and professional accolades, she does not shy away from expressing how much she continues to appreciate many things she learned growing up in a Puerto Rican family. She speaks fondly of her childhood and emphasizes, “I have come to believe that in order to thrive, a child must have at least one adult in her life who shows her unconditional love, respect, and confidence.”<sup>137</sup> Her memoir defines a strong connection with her

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Sotomayor, 301.

<sup>134</sup> “Yls 2013 Commencement: Graduates Encouraged to Use Law as Tool for Change.” *Yale Law School*, 2 May 2023, <https://law.yale.edu/yls-today/news/yls-2013-commencement-graduates-encouraged-use-law-tool-change>.

<sup>135</sup> “59th Inaugural Ceremonies.” *The Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies*, 1 Mar. 2021, <https://www.inaugural.senate.gov/59th-inaugural-ceremonies/>.

<sup>136</sup> *Confirmation Hearing on the Nomination of Hon. Sonia Sotomayor, to Be an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States*, govInfo, 2010, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-111shrg56940/html/CHRG-111shrg56940.htm>. Accessed 3 May 2023.

<sup>137</sup> Sotomayor, 16.



family and how much she enjoyed the family gatherings. The family parties offered a display of cultural events for Sotomayor and helped her develop an enthusiasm for the Latinidad she grew up surrounded with. “The poems Abuelita and her listeners loved were often in the key of nostalgia and drenched in rosy, sunset hues that obscured the poverty, disease, and natural disasters that they had left behind,”<sup>138</sup> she says.

For many Puerto Ricans of the diaspora, education was the guide that could place their children on the path to success. According to journalist Juan Gonzalez, “After the terrible poverty they’d faced in Puerto Rico, they believed that an education—any education—was their children’s only hope for progress.”<sup>139</sup> Gonzalez goes on to say, “But we in that second generation—smart, urban, English-dominant remained acutely aware that the broader Anglo society still regarded Puerto Ricans as less than full Americans,”<sup>140</sup> Gonzalez says.

In *My Beloved World*, Sotomayor gives the reader a glimpse into a proud Puerto Rican family in which food, poetry, music, and games gave them an escape to adjust to their lives on the mainland.<sup>141</sup> Her family has served as cultural role models and with their example motivated her to remain close to her Puerto Rican roots. The involvement of Sotomayor in her family affairs has continued with her nephews and her many godchildren.<sup>142</sup> Love for family and community, pride, and perseverance are essential in Sotomayor’s loving and humble disposition.

Undoubtedly, the socialization, love, and support she received as a child have played an essential role in the way Sotomayor relates to people. The same sense of community and sharing with others have continued in her life as a Supreme Court Justice. In appearances and interviews,

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>139</sup> Juan Gonzalez, *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* (New York, Viking 2000) 91.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Sotomayor, 19.

<sup>142</sup> Felix, 185.

it is common to see her interacting with the audience and moving among the crowd to answer questions. For example, Justice Sotomayor was invited by New York Stories on March 8, 2019, to commemorate the 911 Memorial and Museum.<sup>143</sup> She requested permission from her security marshals to move among the people in attendance, shaking hands and greeting them as she answered their questions. As noted by Antonia Felix, “Sotomayor is consistently described as warm and generous by her friends and colleagues, and the emotional support that sustains her has come from her personal family as well as the work family and friends that surround her.”<sup>144</sup> Felix 185. That warmth makes Justice Sotomayor approachable according to those who have had the chance to work with her and some attest that the Judge is a caring person who possesses remarkable personal qualities. “She is a very warm person, very smart, with a lot of interests and a gracious, generous spirit,”<sup>145</sup> her friend Joseph Evall says.

The sense of community taught by her family and her cultural adherences to the Latino community in New York City was the clearest in her June 4, 2010, commencement speech given to graduates of Hostos Community College.<sup>146</sup> This speech was poignant because her mother was an alumnus of the school. “In 1970, Hostos Community College opened, and this opening opened the door to my mother’s dreams, and it opened the path to where I am today,”<sup>147</sup> said Justice Sotomayor. During the ceremony, she was recognized with the Hostos Community College Medal of Honor which is the highest honor the school gives. In addition, her mother Celina received an Alumni Pioneer Award, which is given to alumni who exemplify the

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<sup>143</sup> 911 Memorial, “New York Stories: Sonia Sotomayor” 3/8/19,” YouTube, 17 Jul 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tL-3rC95dZU>.

<sup>144</sup> Felix, 185.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>146</sup> “Commencement 2010: Hostos Community College of the City University of New York.” *Commencement 2010 | Hostos Community College of The City University of New York*, 5 May 2023, [https://apps.hostos.cuny.edu/commencement2010/press\\_sotomayor.shtml](https://apps.hostos.cuny.edu/commencement2010/press_sotomayor.shtml).

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

intellectual growth and accomplishments that a Hostos education can provide.<sup>148</sup> Sotomayor has remained close to her Bronx community by participating in social and educational events.

Sotomayor's national standing is evidenced by her many accolades and awards, including twelve honorary law school degrees. In 2015, she received the Woodrow Wilson from Princeton University and the Katherine Hepburn Medal from Bryn Mawr College.<sup>149</sup> The Hispanic Heritage Foundation Award recognized Sotomayor as an invaluable member of the Hispanic community in 2016.<sup>150</sup> She was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 2019 at Seneca Falls.<sup>151</sup> The New York City Bar Association presented its Association Medal and portrait unveiling to Justice Sotomayor on March 7, 2023.<sup>152</sup>

Justice Sotomayor has also received recognition from the community she so fervently represents. In June 2010, the Bronxdale Houses were renamed and commemorated in her honor in a ceremony she attended.<sup>153</sup> In addition, a new school in Yonkers, New York, is under construction and expected to be completed for the 2023-24 school year will honor Sotomayor by naming the school "Justice Sonia Sotomayor Community School."<sup>154</sup> When Justice Sotomayor is not on the bench, she advocates for children, and her community continues recognizing her effort. Justice Sotomayor had fulfilled the two promises President Obama requested from her

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> The Supreme Court. <https://supremecourthistory.org/supreme-court-justices/associate-justice-sonia-sotomayor/>.

<sup>150</sup> Hispanic Heritage Foundation. "Supreme Court Justice Awarded at HHA's." *Hispanic Heritage Foundation*, 27 July 2018, <https://hispanicheritage.org/u-s-supreme-court-justice-honored-by-hispanic-heritage-awards/>. Accessed 4 May 2023.

<sup>151</sup> "Sonia Sotomayor." *National Women's Hall of Fame*, <https://www.womenofthehall.org/inductee/sonia-sotomayor-2/>.

<sup>152</sup> "City Bar Presents Association Medal to U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor and Unveils Her Portrait: Media Listing: NYC Bar." *New York City Bar*, [www.nycbar.org/media-listing/media/detail/city-bar-presents-association-medal-to-us-supreme-court-justice-sonia-sotomayor-and-unveils-her-portrait](http://www.nycbar.org/media-listing/media/detail/city-bar-presents-association-medal-to-us-supreme-court-justice-sonia-sotomayor-and-unveils-her-portrait). Accessed 22 May 2023.

<sup>153</sup> Cara Buckley, "Bronx Housing Project to Be Named for Sotomayor." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 22 May 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/22/nyregion/22sotomayor.html>. Accessed 5 May 2023.

<sup>154</sup> "City of Yonkers Breaks Ground on \$76 Million Justice Sonia Sotomayor Community School." *Real Estate in Depth*, <https://www.realestateindepth.com/news/city-of-yonkers-breaks-ground-on-76-million-justice-sonia-sotomayor-community-school/>. Accessed 7 May 2023.

when he nominated her to the United States Supreme Court. Recalling President Obama's requests, Sotomayor said, "He asked me to make him two promises." The first was to remain the person I was and the second to stay connected to my community."<sup>155</sup> There is no doubt that Sotomayor has fulfilled those two promises and has remained close to her essence and her community. Sonia Sotomayor has reached and surpassed the American Dream.

President Obama's poignant speech on behalf of Sotomayor at the White House on August 12, 2009, was a historic moment in many levels. As noted by Felix, "He told them that the historic moment was not just about her. It is about every child who will grow up thinking to him or herself, if Sonia Sotomayor can make it, then maybe I can, too."<sup>156</sup> President Obama went on to say that "It's about everyone in this nation facing challenges and struggles in their lives, who hears Justice Sotomayor's story and thinks to themselves, if she could overcome so much and go so far, then why can't I?"<sup>157</sup> Sotomayor's accomplishments and hard work have placed her in the position she is today as one of the most influential Latinas of the century. Education is undoubtedly the great equalizer, and Justice Sotomayor's life, with its struggles and merits, can attest to it.

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<sup>155</sup> Felix, 216.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

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