

## **Sonia Sotomayor**

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Volume: 37 | No: 23

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Issued : 06/11/2009

The nomination of Sonia Sotomayor to the U.S. Supreme Court is a deep source of pride for the people of Puerto Rico. Sotomayor's qualifications for the post are exceptional. She is a summa cum laude graduate of Princeton University and received her J.D. from Yale Law School where she was an editor of the Yale Law Journal. Upon graduation, she went on to serve as an assistant district attorney in New York under the highly respected District Attorney Robert Morgenthau. She then went into private practice specializing in intellectual property litigation, international law and arbitration. She left a lucrative private practice to become a federal district court judge in New York. As a trial judge, she gained a reputation for being well-prepared in advance of a case and moving cases along a tight schedule. Her most notable case was the one where she issued a preliminary injunction ending the 1994 Major League baseball strike the day before the new season was scheduled to begin.

On June 25, 1997, Sotomayor was nominated by President Bill Clinton to a seat on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit. A prescient Rush Limbaugh opened fire against her arguing she was an ultraliberal on a "rocket ship" to the Supreme Court. With complete Democratic support as well as support from 25 Republicans, she was confirmed by the U.S. Senate. Sotomayor has served on the Second Circuit Court of Appeals for more than 10 years and has written about 380 opinions where she was in the majority. Her rulings have led her to be considered as a political centrist by the American Bar Association Journal. Measured by the number of citations of her rulings by other judges and law-review articles, her influence in the federal judiciary has increased significantly and has been greater than that of some other prominent federal appeals court judges. Her professional qualifications to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court are beyond controversy.

As was to be expected, Limbaugh and some Republicans are now attacking her nomination on ideological grounds. In the background, the real objections are that she is a Latina identified with the strife and struggle of her people. To the Rush Limbaughs of the world, this may be a reason to disqualify her. To us in Puerto Rico it is a reason for respect of a breadth of conscience, feeling and knowledge that will enrich the Supreme Court. Every new justice, whether white, black or Latina, brings to the court a particular background that enriches that bench.

Sonia Sotomayor was born in the Bronx, the birthplace of thousands of second-generation Puerto Ricans. Her father, Juan Sotomayor, was from Santurce (in San Juan). Her mother, Celina Báez, is from Lajas. They left Puerto Rico during WWII and married in New York. Sonia was born in 1954. In 1957, the family moved to the Bronxdale Housing Project on Soundview Avenue, which has, at times, been considered part of the East Bronx and the South Bronx.

In those times, leaving for New York was the prevailing drive for Puerto Ricans searching for a better life, for the working class with little or no expectations of good jobs or higher education. As the war ended, the flight from the island increased, and the stimulus to move became more and more seductive. Small enclaves in different parts of New York City began to form. This was a time when New York was buzzing with opportunities for highly motivated skilled and unskilled workers. Retail stores, small businesses, workshops, import-export businesses began to thrive. People were coming back with fancy clothes, tales of cars, parks, arcades, milk and honey. As air travel became more accessible, it was easier to come back and forth. It was a less complex time and an easy decision to make. In time, hundreds of thousands made the choice. So began the great river of people flowing to New York, changing the face of the city and the destiny of many as it did with Sonia.

Her father died of a heart attack at age 42 when she was nine years old. Her mother, Celina, found herself alone with two small children to rear. But the women who left for New York in those early years of the migration were strong and had a vision for their children. Celina understood that discipline and a superior education was the way to provide a brighter future for Sonia and her brother. So, like many other mothers, and at great hardship at times, she enrolled her children in Catholic schools. Sonia attended Blessed Sacrament at the elementary level and Cardinal Spellman High School in the Bronx, the latter a very rigorous school. She graduated valedictorian of her class in 1972 and went to Princeton on a full scholarship.

An Ivy League college can be a social crossroads for a person with a modest background and exceptional talent like Sonia's. She could have chosen to become one of the future yuppie elites of the East Coast or to employ her talents in the service of those, who like her, came from a disadvantaged background. She chose the latter. At the time, Princeton didn't have a single full-time Latino/a professor or any class on Latin America. Through the Acción Puertorriqueña organization, which she co-chaired, Sonia was able to move Princeton to hire Latino/a faculty and create a seminar on Puerto Rican history and politics. She also ran an after-school program for local children and volunteered with Latino/a patients at Trenton Psychiatric Hospital. Her senior thesis was on Muñoz Marín and the struggles of Puerto Rico for economic and political self-determination. At Yale Law School, she followed a similar path, advocating for Latino/a, Asian and Native American students and for hiring more Hispanics for the law school faculty. Once in the practice of law, she became a member of the board of directors of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense & Education Fund. She actively worked on issues such as New York City hiring practices, police brutality, against the death penalty and for voting rights.

So, she will bring to the Supreme Court a background and experience that will enable it to apply the law with greater sensibility to the realities of life in America. Those who think like Rush Limbaugh have a very particular and excluding vision of the U.S. However, the immigrants, poor and disadvantaged also exist and must be included in the court's vision of the rights of all U.S. citizens.