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National Hispanic Heritage Month 2000

Profile -- Week 4

Sonia Sotomayor

Born June 25, 1954 in New York, Sonia Sotomayor has traveled far beyond the Bronx projects where she grew up to become the first Puerto Rican woman to serve as a U.S. Circuit Court judge.

Judge Sotomayor is a first generation American born to parents who were both from Puerto Rico. Despite the fact that she had no lawyer role models among family members or neighbors, she knew from an early age that she wanted to become a lawyer.

"When I was nine or ten, I became enamored of Nancy Drew stories and I wanted to be an investigative detective like her," Judge Sotomayor recalls. "But I had developed diabetes at 8 and was told I wouldn't be able to do that kind of work."

Calling herself "a true media child," she says Perry Mason ultimately provided the motivation to switch her career goals.

"I noticed that Perry Mason was involved in a lot of the same kinds of investigative work that I had been fascinated with reading Nancy Drew, so I decided to become a lawyer," Judge Sotomayor explains. "Once I focused on becoming a lawyer, I never deviated from that goal."

Urged by a high school friend to attend an Ivy League college, Judge Sotomayor enrolled at Princeton University, finding it a "very foreign experience for someone from the South Bronx." She refers to her years there as "the single most growing event of my life" and succeeded in graduating summa cum laude in 1976. She went on to Yale Law School where she was the editor of the law journal and received her J.D. degree in 1979.

Judge Sotomayor began her career as an assistant district attorney, working in the New York County District Attorney's Office from 1979 - 1984 with Robert Morgenthau. As a member of the Trial Bureau, she litigated cases involving robberies, assaults, murders, police brutality, and child pornography.

"My work ran the gamut of criminal activity," she explains. "It was wonderful training for a lawyer."

In 1984, she entered private practice, working as one of only seven or eight litigators in a 35-lawyer firm in New York City. Her areas of specialty included intellectual property and copyright cases, international transactions involving grain commodity trading, and



automobile dealer relations law. Working for both American and foreign clients, she had the opportunity to travel extensively domestically and abroad. Some of her most exciting cases involved legal work on behalf of clients who were trade mark owners. Many of the cases required a great deal of investigative work when counterfeit issues arose.

“As a result, I had my own bulletproof vest and worked closely with law enforcement officials,” she says, fulfilling in part the Nancy Drew fantasies of her youth.

In 1990, the managing litigation partner of her firm, David A. Botwinik, urged her to apply when the Senate Judicial Committee was seeking nominations for a vacated seat on the federal bench.

“I had always wanted to be a judge, but I assumed it would happen much later in my career,” Judge Sotomayor explains. “I was still in my 30s at the time and I felt they would not even consider me. If it hadn’t been for my partner’s insistence and support, I never would have applied.”

Nominated by President George Bush in November 1991, she was confirmed on August 11, 1992 by the U.S. Senate to serve as a federal judge for the U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York. Only six years later, she was nominated by President William Clinton to serve as an appellate judge and she was confirmed by the Senate on October 2, 1998 to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit.

She describes her transition from practitioner to judge and later to appellate judge as “very dramatic and exciting,” and she enjoys the challenge of hearing cases that present many complex legal issues.

In addition to her work on the bench, Judge Sotomayor is an adjunct professor at New York University School of Law and a lecturer-in-law at Columbia Law School. She is a member of the American Bar Association, the New York Women’s Bar Association, the Puerto Rican Bar Association, the Hispanic National Bar Association, the Association of Judges of Hispanic Heritage, and the National Council of La Raza. She has received many honors including, most recently, an award from the National Association of Women Lawyers.

Judge Sotomayor recommends that those who want to pursue a legal career today study hard and become the most well-rounded person they can during their years as a student.

“The practice of law is perhaps the most diverse, eclectic exposure to life that you can receive,” she explains. “People come to you with their problems, and their cases cover a wide range of issues. For you to be able to practice law with the vision it requires, you have to be a very well-rounded person because whatever happens out in the real world, whether it involves business or family or technology, usually finds its way into the courtroom.”

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