

Sonia Sotomayor

2009–



Source: Photograph by Steve Peterovics. Collection of the Supreme Court of the United States

SONIA SOTOMAYOR was born June 25, 1954, in the Bronx, a borough of New York City. Her father, Juan Luis Sotomayor, and mother, Celina Baez, had moved to New York from Puerto Rico during World War II. He worked in a factory and spoke only Spanish. She served in the Women's Army Corps during the war and later became the supervisor of an emergency room and subsequently a nurse at a methadone clinic. Juan Luis died at age 42, leaving Celina to raise nine-year-old Sonia and her younger brother on her own. They lived in the Bronxdale Housing project, an ethnically diverse complex.

Sonia Sotomayor was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes at age seven; daily insulin injections have enabled her to control her disease. She excelled at school and spent her free time reading. She also decided on a career path at age ten after watching *Perry Mason* on television. Sotomayor was admitted to the academically rigorous

Cardinal Spellman High School, a parochial school in the Northeast Bronx. She was elected to the student government and graduated as valedictorian in 1972.

Princeton University offered Sotomayor a full scholarship. She did well academically, graduating summa cum laude and receiving the university's highest academic award in 1976. She also joined *Acción Puertorriqueña*, a group that lobbied the school to hire Hispanic administrators and professors and to offer more courses about Latin America. A history major, she wrote her thesis on Luis Muñoz Marín, Puerto Rico's first democratically elected governor.

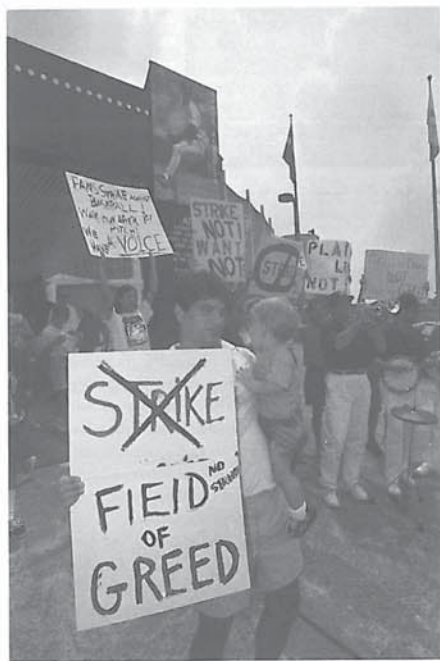
Sotomayor won a scholarship to Yale Law School. She served as an editor of the *Yale Law Journal* and managing editor of *Studies in World Public Order*. After graduating in 1979, Sotomayor moved to work as an assistant district attorney in New York County. She spent five years prosecuting criminal cases—mainly

those involving murder, robbery, and other street crimes.

Sotomayor entered private practice in 1984, becoming partner at the boutique firm of Pavia and Harcourt in 1988. She practiced general civil litigation and her clients were mostly international corporations. During her time in private practice, Sotomayor also took on pro bono work. In 1987, New York governor Mario Cuomo appointed her to the Board of the State of New York Mortgage Agency, which helped low-income people get home mortgages. The following year Mayor Ed Koch appointed her to the newly created New York City Campaign Finance Board. Its aim was to implement a voluntary scheme wherein local candidates received public matching funds in exchange for limits on contributions and spending and for disclosing their finances. Sotomayor was also appointed to the Board of

Directors of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund in 1980. Her service in these public interest organizations ended with her appointment as a judge in 1992.

It was Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, D-N.Y., who informally recommended to President George H. W. Bush that he appoint Sotomayor to be a district judge for the Southern District of New York. Still in her thirties, she became the youngest member of that trial court. She famously issued an injunction against Major League Baseball owners in 1995, effectively ending a baseball strike that had caused the World Series to be cancelled. Her ruling, which was upheld by the Second Circuit, prevented Major League Baseball from implementing a new collective bargaining agreement and using replacement players. She was praised for saving baseball after the longest stoppage in professional sports



As a district judge, Sonia Sotomayor, an ardent Yankees fan, issued an injunction against Major League Baseball that effectively ended the baseball strike that deprived fans of the 1995 World Series. Protesters held signs outside the Houston Astrodome in August 1994 in a futile attempt at persuading the ball clubs not to strike.

Source: AP Photo/Rick Bowmer

history. Sotomayor is a lifelong Yankees fan who attends games regularly.

In 1998 President Bill Clinton appointed Judge Sotomayor to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit. Sen. Moynihan and Sen. Alfonse M. D'Amato, R-N.Y., pushed for her confirmation. Sotomayor became the first Hispanic woman to serve on that court. In her eleven years as an appeals court judge, she earned a reputation for asking tough questions from the bench and for being well prepared for each case. Her rulings tended to be lengthy, with great attention to detail.

As an appellate judge, Sotomayor heard a broad range of cases, including many business cases, and authored roughly 400 opinions. A few of the cases she ruled on were appealed to the Supreme Court. In *Correctional Services Corp. v. Malesko* (2000), Sotomayor wrote in support of the right of an individual to sue a private corporation working on behalf of the federal government for alleged violations of that individual's constitutional right. Specifically, the case involved a former prisoner seeking to sue the private company operating the federal halfway house facility in which he resided. The Supreme Court reversed Sotomayor's ruling, with Justices John Paul Stevens, David Souter, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and Stephen Breyer dissenting.

Sotomayor also presided over several high profile cases, including *Center for Reproductive Law and Policy v. Bush* (2002), in which she upheld the Bush administration's Mexico City Policy, which forbids the U.S. federal government from contributing to nongovernmental institutions that perform or promote abortion in other nations. Another controversial case heard during her tenure was *Ricci v. Stefano*, which involved the right of the city of New Haven, Connecticut, to abandon one exam used to determine promotions for firefighters in favor of an alternative test. The problem was that no black firefighters had qualified for promotion under the original test, and the city was worried that minority firefighters might sue under Title VII for "disparate impact." New Haven decided not to certify the test results (a lower court had previously upheld its right to do this). However, several firefighters who had passed the test—including one Hispanic and one white dyslexic who had gone to great lengths to prepare for the test—sued New Haven for discrimination. A Second Circuit panel that included Sotomayor affirmed the lower court's ruling. When the case was appealed to

the Supreme Court in 2009, a majority of five justices found that New Haven's choice violated Title VII of the Civil Rights Law.

In addition to her judicial duties, Sotomayor taught trial and appellate advocacy at New York University School of Law and lectured at Columbia Law School. She also accepted many invitations to give speeches, charming her audiences with her down-to-earth style. Many of her talks were delivered to women's groups or minority groups. In a 1996 speech at the Hispanic National Bar Association, she emphasized the importance of her heritage: "Although I am an American, love my country and could achieve its opportunity of succeeding at anything I worked for, I also have a Latina soul and heart, with the magic that carries." Sotomayor maintains strong ties to Puerto Rico and has visited her extended family there frequently since she was young.

On May 26, 2009, President Barack Obama nominated Sotomayor to the Supreme Court to replace David Souter. Some conservative Republican senators expressed concern about a line that she used in some form in a number of her speeches and lectures: "I would hope that a 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." Sotomayor subsequently diffused criticism when she explained to the Judiciary Committee: "I do not believe that any ethnic, racial or gender group has an advantage in sound judgment."

On August 6, 2009, the Senate confirmed Sotomayor's nomination by a vote of 68–31. The vote was mostly along party lines, with no Democrats opposing her and nine Republicans supporting her. She was sworn in on August 8, 2009, by Chief Justice John G. Roberts, Jr., becoming the third woman appointed to the Court and the first justice to identify herself as Hispanic.

Justice Sotomayor quickly showed that she likes to question counsel vigorously from the bench, especially to test them on the facts and on the procedural aspects of the case. She has proved to be a consistent member of the Court's liberal wing, voting most frequently in the 2010 term with Elena Kagan. Sotomayor is unafraid to write solo dissents and concurrences and has emerged as the Court's voice of conscience and defender of the rights of convicted criminals. For example, in 2010 she publically criticized her fellow justices' decision not to hear the petition of a Louisiana prisoner who, having



When President Barack Obama appointed Sonia Sotomayor to the Court in 2009 she became the first justice to self-identify as Hispanic: her parents were both born in Puerto Rico. The "first Hispanic" title could also be bestowed on Justice Benjamin Cardozo, a Sephardic Jew of distant Portuguese descent appointed to the Court in 1932, but Cardozo did not consider himself one.

Source: Photograph by Steve Pritzway. Collection of the Supreme Court of the United States

refused to take his HIV medication to protest a prisoner transfer, was being punished with hard labor in the heat.

Sotomayor married her high school sweetheart, Kevin Edward Noonan, in 1976, just after graduating from Princeton. He became a biologist and a

biotech patent lawyer. They divorced in 1983. Sotomayor's brother, Juan Luis Junior, is a doctor living in Syracuse. His children have attended Yankees games with their aunt, as do Sotomayor's many godchildren. Sotomayor also enjoys ballet and modern dance.