

RUTH BADER GINSBURG – DEFENDER OF EQUAL RIGHTS

By Joseph Collins



In the 226-year history of the U.S. Supreme Court, there have been very few female justices. In fact, of the 112 justices who have served over the years, only 4 have been women – about 3.5% of the total. Unfortunately, the widespread sexism of previous generations made it impossible for women to gain access to the court. Only recently, have there been any at all, starting with Sandra Day O’Connor in 1981. The second woman chosen for the Supreme Court was **Ruth Bader Ginsburg**, appointed in 1993 by then President Bill Clinton. Since taking office 25 years ago, Justice Ginsburg has become one of the most popular justices in recent history – known for her wisdom, wit, and integrity.

From the start, Ginsburg has been a pioneer for women in the field of law, and has been a staunch supporter of women’s rights and equality. She has fought for basic civil liberties for all and is a renowned champion of fairness and justice. Always strong in her convictions, but cautious in her rulings, she once said:

“I try to teach through my opinions, through my speeches, how wrong it is to judge people on the basis of what they look like, the color of their skin, or whether they’re men or women.”

Simple, but powerful words, from a woman who is making history and contributing to our highest court in a significant and meaningful way.

A STRONG ROLE MODEL

When Ruth Joan Bader (Ginsburg) was born on March 15th, 1933, the idea of women serving on the Supreme Court of the U.S. was unheard of. At the time, the realm of politics was still very much a “man’s world.” Men dominated every branch of government, including the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. In fact, the entire legal profession was still very much dominated by men – which makes Ruth Bader’s accomplishments all the more impressive.

Ms. Bader grew up in a working-class, low-income family in Brooklyn, NY, the second daughter of Nathan and Celia Bader, Russian-Jewish immigrants. Ginsburg’s younger sister, Marilyn, died at the age of six, leaving her an only child.

Her mother took an active role in her education, often taking her to the local library, instilling in her a devotion to learning. “My mother told me two things constantly. One was to be a lady, and the other was to be independent.” Her mother also taught her about compassion and altruism. Although her mother never went to college, she worked in a garment factory to help pay for the college education of her brother—Ruth’s uncle. This act of self-sacrifice impressed young Ruth so much that it stayed with her for the rest of her life. She said her mother was a great influence on her.

Ruth Bader attended James Madison High School, where she excelled in her studies. From there, she went on to continue her education at Cornell University, in upstate, NY. She graduated in June 1954 with a Bachelor of Arts degree, finishing first in her class. That same year, at the age of 21, she married a law student named Martin Ginsburg, and became pregnant with their first child.

But this was the beginning of a challenging time for Ginsburg. Her husband was drafted into the military later in 1954, leaving her alone to give birth to their daughter, Jane. For a short while, she was forced to raise Jane on her own. To make matters worse, Ruth was demoted from her job at the local Social Security Office, solely because of her pregnancy. However, with her strong upbringing, and a natural inclination for independence, Ruth was more than up to the task of overcoming these obstacles and staying strong. In 1965, she had another child, a son named James.

A MAN'S WORLD



After two years, Ruth's husband left the military and returned to the U.S in 1956 – at which point they both applied to and were accepted at Harvard University. At the university, Ruth learned to balance life as a new mother and a law student. Due to the sexism of the time, Ruth was only one of nine females in a class of more than 500 students. It was, according to Ruth, an environment that was openly hostile to women. She and the other eight young women were often chastised by the dean for taking a seat “away from qualified males.”

But she never let this bother her, staying focused and determined to complete her training. In the end, she excelled academically, and was the first female member of the prestigious Harvard Law Review, a law periodical published by an independent student group at Harvard Law School.

Ruth's husband, having started law school before his wife, graduated ahead of her, and took a job in New York City. To keep the family together, Ruth transferred to Columbia Law School, located in NY. She again excelled at her studies and, mirroring her experience at Harvard, became the first female member of the Columbia Law Review. In 1959, she graduated at the top of her class, earning a Bachelor of Laws. Ruth Bader Ginsburg had an impressive start during her academic years, and she would soon go on to have an impressive career in her role as Supreme Court Justice.

SUPREME COURT JUDGE

When President Carter appointed Ginsburg to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit in 1980, this move paved the way for her nomination as a judge for the Supreme Court. After 13 years at the Court of Appeals, she was nominated in 1993 by President Clinton to fill the seat vacated by Judge Byron White. Clinton was looking for someone who he thought would be able to deal with the more conservative members of the court. At the Senate hearings, Ginsburg refused to answer all of the questions asked about where she would stand on particular issues, which frustrated some members of Congress. Even still, the Senate confirmed her with a 96 to 3 vote, and she took the official oath on August 10th of the same year, and became only the second woman, and second Jew, to take a seat on the highest U.S. court.

Since then, for over 20 years, Ruth Bader Ginsburg has been an active judge for the Supreme Court. Considered part of the “moderate-liberal bloc,” representing gender equality, worker's rights and separation of church and state, she says she favors caution, moderation and restraint in her deliberation. She has proven herself to be fair, but unyielding in her beliefs. She wrote the Supreme Court's landmark

decision in *United States vs. Virginia*, which maintained that the state-supported Virginia Military Institute could not refuse to admit women.

During the hotly contested 2000 presidential election between George Bush and Al Gore, when the disputed votes came to the Supreme Court, Ginsburg was in the minority, favoring Gore. She adamantly objected to the court's decision to hand over the White House to Bush, and she ended her decision with the words "I dissent," deliberately leaving out the word "respectfully," as was tradition, as a show of just how much she opposed the court's ruling.

FIGHTING FOR HER BELIEFS

As a Supreme Court justice, Ruth Bader Ginsburg has consistently supported a woman's right to an abortion, a topic that has been a hot-button issue in Washington for decades. In an interview in 2009, she expressed her opinion on the subject clearly, when she said, "the basic thing is that the government has no business making that choice for a woman."

Ginsburg has been important in several landmark decisions that helped to support progressive policies. In 2015, she was in the majority of the judges when they upheld an important element of President Obama's Affordable Healthcare Act, one that would allow the government to continue to provide subsidies to Americans who buy healthcare. In the same year, she led the way when the Supreme Court voted in favor of legalizing same sex marriage in all 50 states. Ginsburg was instrumental in swinging the votes over to a victory, often giving challenging arguments for it in the early case proceedings.

LEGACY

After 25 years of service as a Supreme Court Judge, Ruth Bader Ginsburg has become something of a pop culture icon. As a paragon of equal rights for women, workers and minorities, she has proven herself to be strong and steadfast in her beliefs, but understanding, compassionate and reasonable. For her tough stances in defending equal rights, she has earned the nickname "the notorious RBG," and has been seen in comic books, on tumblr, and in other key places in pop culture.

She is one of only four women to have the honor of ever having served on the U.S. Supreme Court, so far. She, along with the three other women, has paved the way for a new generation of women judges sitting on the highest court in the country. For this, and her unwavering commitment to integrity, fairness, and reason, Ruth Bader Ginsburg will long be remembered as a pioneer and trendsetter in the field of law and justice.