

Sonia Maria Sotomayor



On May 26, 2009, President Barack Obama nominated Sonia Maria Sotomayor to the United States Supreme Court. After controversial confirmation hearings, she became the first Hispanic Justice and only the third woman to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court .

The confirmation vote in the senate was 68 to 31, clearly a Republican defeat, but also a partisan vote. Those opposed to Sotomayor feared that she would be an activist judge for liberal causes. She was labeled a radical and a racist, and



suggestions were made that by people like Newt Gingrich, that she should withdraw her nomination because her ethnicity would drive her decisions in court.

These fears were largely based on comments she had made in earlier speeches during her career. One of the most controversial and widely publicized was

her remark: **"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."**

The statement was taken largely out of context since it was part of an inspirational speech she gave at a conference to empower Latino/a law



students to be active in representing their communities in the judiciary and in the courts. Her belief was, of course, that family history and life experiences influence how we think about law and justice, but such obvious truths scared Republicans and led to much opposition during the hearings. Fortunately, she was confirmed by a vote of 68 to 31, but it was a very divisive vote: All the Democrats voted “yes,”



but all but 9 Republicans voted “no.”

Since serving on the Court Sotomayor has been a member of the minority and has taken liberal positions in most cases. More recently as the Court has moved further and further to the right, Sotomayor has made it her mission to shine a bright light on the effects that her conservative colleagues’ decisions will have on everyday Americans. She speaks passionately and clearly and in legal language that is easy to understand, speaking for the people and to the people. “She doesn’t mince words or pull any punches. When the Court does something that she sharply disagrees with, she says so in striking dissents that provide a real-world perspective usually missing from the Court’s musty chambers.”

An example of this intention was Sotomayor's long and impassioned (70 page dissent), which she read from the bench on a case where the majority of justices sided with a Colorado web designer who refused to create websites for same-sex weddings. "Sotomayor's lengthy dissent was a dramatic scene during a court term where oral dissents have been rare. In her dissent to Justice Neil Gorsuch's majority opinion, Sotomayor wrote:

"Today, the Court, for the first time in its history, grants a business open to the public a constitutional right to refuse to serve members of a protected class." She noted that **"today's ruling comes amid a backlash to the movement**

for liberty and equality for gender and sexual minorities. New forms of inclusion have been met with reactionary exclusion . . . This is heartbreaking. Sadly, it is also familiar. When the

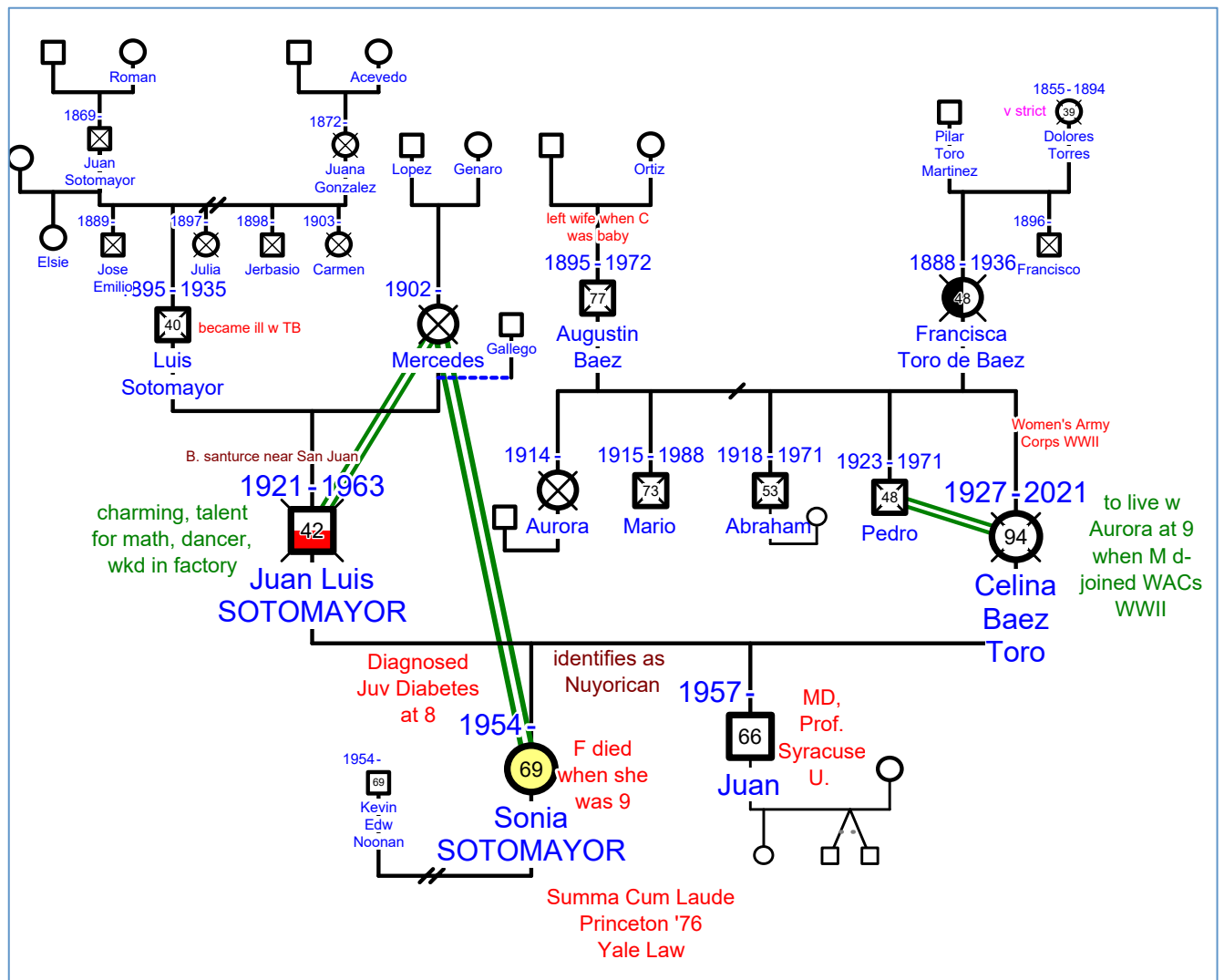


civil rights and women's rights movements sought equality in public life, some public establishments refused. Some even claimed, based on sincere religious beliefs, constitutional rights to discriminate. The brave Justices who once sat on this Court decisively rejected those claims."

<https://www.npr.org/2023/06/30/1185339349/colorado-supreme-court-same-sex-marriage-decision>.

She also read from the bench an impassioned dissent related to the Supreme Court affirmative action ruling. **"Today, this Court stands in the way and rolls back decades of precedent and momentous progress. It holds that race can no longer be used in a limited way in college admissions to achieve such critical benefits. In so holding, the Court cements a superficial rule of colorblindness as a constitutional principle in an endemically segregated society where race has always mattered and continues to matter."** [THEHILL.COM - 06/29/23 10:55am](#)

So Who Is This Puerto Rican Woman Who Became a Supreme Court Justice?



Who is this Puerto Rican woman who became a Supreme Court Justice on August 6, 2009, and who so candidly and passionately speaks about her belief that family history and life experiences influence how we think about law and justice?

Sonia Maria Sotomayor was born June 25, 1954 in the Bronx. Her parents, both immigrants from Puerto Rico came to New York City in 1944, after World

War II.

Her mother, Celina Baez (1927-2021) was born in 1927, in Lajas, and her father, Juan Luis Sotomayor was born 5 years earlier in Santurce, in 1921 and died at 42 in 1963.

Celina grew up in extreme poverty during her early years, in a very rural area in southwestern Puerto Rico. She was the youngest child in the family and was raised primarily by her older siblings because her mother, Francisca, was very ill when she was born, and her father left the family when she was just a toddler. She never met him until much later in life, when he was dying in a hospital. The oldest child, Aurora was sixteen years older than Celina and the first to leave home to work in the nearby town, San German, and to get married.

The responsibility to take care of the family fell to Mario, the second oldest, who was 12 years older than Celina. He was very strict, and often used the belt to discipline Celina whenever he thought she was not doing chores or was acting inappropriately. She was closest to Pedro, the fourth child and Mario's favorite. Mario eventually married and built a small house near his mother and his wife, Maria, helped his mother with the caretaking of her family. But the mother died when Celina was only nine (the same age as Sonia was when her father, Juan Sotomayor died), and she went to live with the oldest sister, Aurora who was working as a seamstress. Abraham, the third child, had already moved out and was living with an older woman in Mayaguez trying to make it as a boxer. Pedro, the fourth child, remained with Mario and his wife and children, but eventually Mario also moved to San German where he bought a bakery, and Pedro joined the Army.

Celina had gone to a rural school while living



with her mother. After the mother's death she moved to San German and stayed with her oldest sister Aurora, and continued her studies, while working with her sister sewing handkerchiefs.

She was not a very good student, but she loved to read and had a taste for adventure. Pearl Harbor was attacked while she was still in High School and many of the young men in Puerto Rico were recruited and drafted into the Army.

Many young women also joined the Women's Army Corps and Celina was among them, seeing the WAC's as her only way out of a life that she thought had no future different from what she had in the present. She was not old enough to enlist, but managed with the help of her brother Mario to falsify her birth certificate and joined the Corps. Hers was one of the first Puerto Rican WAC units, and her first opportunity to experience being independent and to feel excited about life.

Celina Sotomayor joined the Women's Army Corps (One of the first Puerto Rican WAC Units)



In her book **My Beloved World** (2014) Sonia Sotomayor describes her mother's entering a world she had never imagined. Her description of her motherwearing store bought clothing, speaking English, talking on the telephone, and living in New York City is very moving and of course, only one generation away from her own journey from poverty in the Bronx to the United States Supreme Court. This illustrates amazingly an example of a family of strong women willing to take risks, work hard, and make real a vision of a better world!

It was in New

Sonia Sotomayor about 7

York City that Celina met Juan Luis Sotomayor, at a party in the Bronx. Luis was very handsome, and conveyed interest in what she thought about the world. She had never experienced someone being interested in what she had to say. They



wrote letters to each other and every time she could leave the army camp she would end up at another party at his mother's house where she began to feel at home.



Juli, as Juan was called, was very close to his mother Mercedes. The two loved to tell stories and recite poetry. Her house was always full of family and friends because Mercedes loved to cook and dance. For Celina this was a home like she never had growing up with a strict grandmother, ill mother, and later with a very conservative and religious oldest sister. After her discharge from the Army, Celina stayed in New York, married Juan, and lived with Mercedes until they were able to move into their own apartment.

Juan (later called Juli) born in Santurce, a town near San Juan in Puerto Rico. He was the oldest child, but when his father developed tuberculosis he left school and joined other family members who worked at a button factory to help support the family. He only completed the sixth grade, though he had an amazing



aptitude for numbers. At one point some professors from the University of Puerto Rico who had learned about his ability to solve math problems in his head, offered him a scholarship to go to boarding school; but his mother refused to let him go, and when his father died he assumed responsibility for the family. He was only 13!



He lived with his mother until he was 22 and she decided to move to New York to find work and create a better life. By that time his mother's boyfriend, Gallego, was living with them, but Juan



Juahn So  tomayor

never really accepted him, and their relationship was always awkward.

In New York, Juan went to work at a mannequin factory where once they discovered his talent for math, they made him their bookkeeper. In addition to his

Juahn Sotomayor

exceptional ability in math Juli was charming, a good dancer, and had an artistic flair that attracted Celina and others to him. But then the mannequin factory closed and he lost his job and although he found another factory job he never again felt the same appreciation. He had not pursued further education and was stuck in jobs where he could not use his talents. That loss, coupled with Celina's push to move to a new housing project that took him away from the neighborhood where his family and friends lived changed him.

He began to drink more, and fights with Celina about it escalated. As his drinking increased his health was affected. He no longer went to his mother's parties except on major holidays, and on those occasions everyone worried about him, since he had developed neuropathy from his alcohol abuse and would lose his balance from contortions and nerve spasms.

By then the couple had two children Sonia and her younger brother, Juan (Junior), born in 1957. Although their relationship was in shambles, Juan

encouraged Celina to finish high school, take a secretarial course, and complete credits to become a Licensed Practical Nurse. Perhaps this was his way of insuring that the children would not suffer financially knowing that his own health was deteriorating. As Celina advanced Juan withdrew more. No friends came to their home, and family tended to not visit.

Sonia's home was somber and full of conflict. Her mother worked many hours at the hospital as a nurse's aid and after school Sonia and her brother would come home to their father. He would cook dinner, feed Sonia and "Junior," as her brother was called, and then he retreated to his bedroom, leaving the children to themselves. When their mother came home late from work the fighting would start. After his death Sonia learned that her father used to drink before she and her brother came home, and again after dinner in his bedroom.

For Sonia the situation at home was very difficult. She felt caught in the middle of her parent's fights, and between her mother and her grandmother, Mercedes, and the rest of the family, who blamed Celina for having taken Juan away from their family and for his problems. Sonia loved her mother and knew how hard she worked to

get ahead and to keep the family



going despite her father's drinking and his illness. Sonia didn't like that Mercedes and her sisters blamed her mother for her father's problems, but she also didn't like that her mother was always working and then, when she came home was angry, frustrated and fighting with her father. She loved her father and thought he was ill and didn't like her mother fighting with him.



Sonia Sotomayor about 6
with younger brother



Sonia Sotomayor at about 7 with her mother

Visits to her Mercedes' house lessened and Sonia felt very sad about it. She had developed a very close relationship with Mercedes, who had the same outgoing personality and love for family gatherings. Sonia loved to be at her house. There she played with her cousins and spied on the grownups late at night after most of the family had left. That was when her grandmother and Gallego who were spiritual mediums would conduct séances where they called on the spirits and were possessed by them.

Celina didn't believe in spiritism and would get angry at Sonia for being curious and hiding to watch. When it was time to leave Sonia would beg her mother to let her stay and Celina would refuse, but eventually she would give in. Sonia especially loved having her grandmother's attention all to herself. Her grandmother's house provided a haven for her, away from the sadness and tension that filled her parent's home.



Sonia's life changed drastically when at 8 she was diagnosed with juvenile diabetes, type 1. This sent ripples throughout the extended family activating triangles in which Sonia was caught in the middle. Mercedes was convinced that this terrible affliction came from Celina's side of the family and tried to heal her by using her spiritual powers and her knowledge of healing herbs. When this didn't work she felt helpless. Celina knew that this was a chronic illness that would need treatment for a lifetime, and it meant that someone would have to give her a shot every day.

Juan's assumption was that Celina, the nurse, would do it, but she knew her schedule would prevent her from always being available. He couldn't do it because of the tremors in his hands caused by his drinking. Listening to them fight about who was going to give her the shot, Sonia realized that this was about her life being at risk, and that she needed to take control. She felt sorry for her dad, and she also understood why her mother would get angry about his drinking. Sonia did not want to be the reason for their fighting and so, with her mother's help she learned to give herself the shot. Taking control of her diabetes at eight was one of the most important steps she took toward independence, and to detriangle from her parents.

Sonia said in My Beloved World, "I learned more about self-discipline from living with diabetes than I ever did from the Sisters of Charity" who taught her in

school.

A year later, when Sonia was only 9, her father died. She and her brother had left for school that morning knowing that their father was staying home from work because he was feeling sick. On the way home after school they were met by their mother's friend Ana, who had obviously been crying. She called their mother, and then took them to their apartment. Sonia knew something really bad was happening, and within seconds she learned that her father had died. While on her bed crying, Ana came and told her that she had to stop crying-to be strong for her mother. Once again, she found herself having to take control of her emotions, to take care of her mother, and to keep herself on track. Her mother, and her grandmother were both grieving. From this point there were no more get togethers at Mercedes' house, no music, and no dancing.



Celina and the two children stayed with Mercedes until they moved to a different apartment in the projects. It was a new place, but there was no light, no life, their mother was grieving, and every day when they came home from school, her mother would come out of her bedroom, barely cook dinner, and then go back to the room and shut the door. Sonia was afraid and couldn't understand what was going on. She had imagined that now that her father was dead, the three of them would move on and that without the fights between her parents, the home would be an easier place to live.

Sonia tried to keep a routine at home, dragging her mother to go grocery shopping, waiting for life to take a normal route. Her mother's friends were worried too. And then one day Sonia couldn't take it anymore, and as she describes in My Beloved World, banged on her mother's door and yelled "What's wrong with you? Papi died. Are you going to die too? Then what happens to me and Junior? Stop already, Mami, stop it!"

Resilience, strength, determination, and a rational mind were driving 9 year old Sonia to take a position with her mother. She was not going to keep quiet, and let fear keep her from taking a step toward change.

It was only years later that she understood that her mother was grieving the loss of the charming, generous, loving man she had met in 1944, and that she was afraid of raising two children alone with very few resources. Celina was falsely feeling guilty that even with the knowledge she had as a practical nurse she had not been able to prevent Juan's illness or death. Sonia's confrontation of her mother, even if out of desperation, led to a change in the family. Celina ended her grieving and opened the blinds. She once again took control, working many hours but not running away from home. As Sonia and Junior grew, their home became a place where friends gathered to work on school projects, to rehearse speeches, and to eat rice and beans and pork chops. The traditions Sonia learned from Mercedes had become part of her and provided sustenance to her life.

As many immigrants in this country, Celina worked hard and sacrificed to fulfill her dream of a better life for her children. She moved from one place to another in the Bronx looking for safer neighborhoods, taking advantage of low income housing being built, and she made it possible for both Sonia and Junior to attend Catholic schools through high school. They excelled and graduated from Cardinal Spellman high school with honors, and they both earned scholarships to go on to college, Sonia to Princeton, and Junior to NYU.



Princeton for Sonia was reminiscent of how her parents must have felt when they first arrived in the mainland from Puerto Rico. She felt excitement and confusion, and a longing for the familiar, but most challenging was the realization that educationally she was worlds apart from most of her peers. Going to Catholic schools may have given her a better education than she would have obtained at the public schools in her Bronx neighborhood, but compared to the education that most Princeton students received at private schools and in wealthy districts the disparity was marked. What set Sonia apart and gave her an edge was that she did not let unfairness, disadvantage, or inequity stop her from taking on the challenge to pursue what she wanted. This was one of the lessons that she had learned from her mother, her grandmothers and other women in her family.

Her grandmother, her mother, her aunts, her mother's friends, all those who took on the challenge of forging new lives in a new country were her first teachers. They were strong women willing to leave their family members and friends in Puerto Rico to come to New York to struggle for better lives for themselves and their children. These families while living in poverty and facing daily adversity created a "cultural village" in the South Bronx, as Sonia refers to it, that sustained them by providing a sense of home and belonging. Sonia grew up among them in a large extended family and with friends who accepted and supported her, and who nurtured her dreams.



REFERENCES

- Sotomayor, S. (2014). *My Beloved World*. New York: Vintage Press.
- <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/sonia-sotomayor-supreme-court-dissent>
- [THEHILL.COM - 06/29/23 10:55 AM](https://www.thehill.com/policy/immigration/2023/06/29/sonia-sotomayor-supreme-court-dissent/)
- <https://www.npr.org/2023/06/30/1185339349/colorado-supreme-court-same-sex-marriage-decision>