

Former Rutgers law students remember Ruth Bader Ginsburg, their professor and leader



Nick Romanenko/Rutgers University

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg is honored on April 11, 1995 at a program called "Rutgers Women and Public Policy."

By Rodrigo Torrejon | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com (Sep. 20, 2020)

<https://www.nj.com/news/2020/09/former-rutgers-law-students-remember-ruth-bader-ginsburg-their-professor-and-leader.html>

When The Women's Rights Law Reporter - the country's first periodical to focus solely on women's rights law - was faced with an uncertain future, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, then a law professor at Rutgers- Newark School of Law, stepped in to help the law review get back on its feet.

The Reporter, started by Anne Marie Boylan in her Newark apartment, had published just one issue before it ran out of money and a headquarters, said Diane Crothers, a former civil rights attorney who was one of the founding members of the periodical.

But Ginsburg, who had served as one of the periodical's advisors for its inaugural issue, helped bring The Reporter into a basement on Rutgers law school's campus and vouched for it, saving it from extinction, she said.

"Ruth was already one of our faculty advisors," recalled Crothers. "Since we couldn't raise

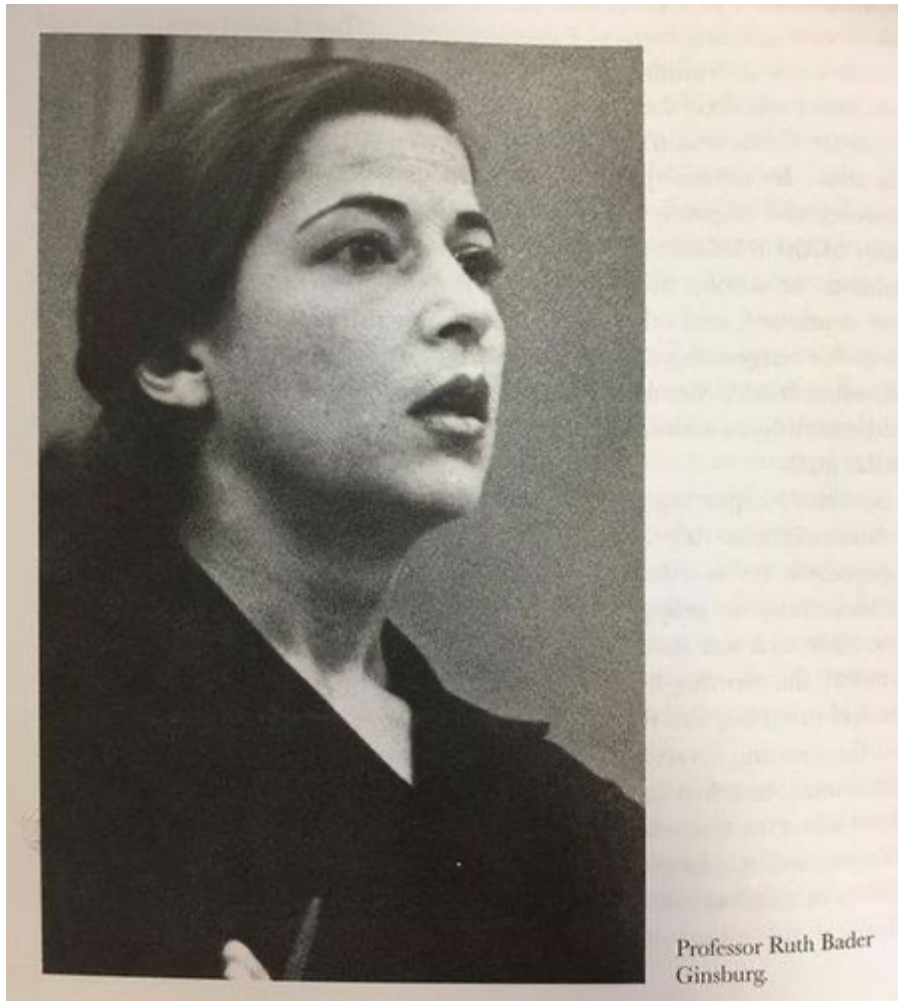
money from the foundation community, she helped us move into a basement room in the Rutgers Law school. She was instrumental in that.”

Years after the first issues of *The Reporter*, Ginsburg would become a trail-blazing attorney and judge, trying and setting precedent in landmark cases, many of them centered on women’s rights in America. Decades later, she would become the second woman to serve on the United States Supreme Court.

On Friday, Ginsburg died at 87 of complications from metastatic pancreatic cancer just three months after she announced she was undergoing chemotherapy treatment for lesions on her liver, the latest of her several battles with cancer.

Her death sent the country into mourning, with tributes coming in torrents from political supporters and opponents alike. Ginsburg’s death also set off a national debate over whether President Donald Trump should appoint a new Supreme Court Justice to replace her before the election.

For Crothers and Elizabeth Langer, who were both students at Rutgers-Newark School of Law, Ginsburg’s legacy was much more personal.



Courtesy of Rutgers University

Photo of Ruth Bader Ginsburg in the Rutgers Law School yearbook when she was a law professor.

When Langer first started at Rutgers' law school, she hadn't yet met Ginsburg, she said. But she had heard of The Women's Rights Law Reporter, which she thought would be indispensable.

"The idea of starting a law journal dedicated to women's rights was a fairly radical idea," she said. "In 1970 there were no journals dedicated to women's rights. It wasn't even a legitimate subject of inquiry."

When she brought the idea to the school administration, it was almost immediately met with resistance, said Langer.

"I met with the dean...and asked him if we could have a place at Rutgers law school along with the other journals," said Langer. "He was very skeptical. He didn't really want a publication that had no money and no staff, even though we were enthusiastic."

He gave Langer and the group of law students she organized three conditions on which they could start the Reporter at Rutgers, she said: a place to work, funding and a faculty advisor.

After finding a headquarters in the basement of a dilapidated townhouse near the law school and securing funding, it was down to the faculty advisor.

Langer had not taken any classes with Ginsburg but heard of her reputation and interest in pushing women's rights forward, she said. Without knowing her, Langer set up an appointment with Ginsburg to ask if she'd be the review's faculty advisor. She was pleasantly surprised when Ginsburg quickly agreed.

As an advisor, Ginsburg was a "taskmaster," exacting in her reviews and when it came to legal research, said Langer. But despite her meticulous nature, Ginsburg would always be there for the students that sought her help.

Her word lent the review weight as it pushed against a current, even after Ginsburg left the law school in 1972.

"She gave us credibility. Gave us legitimacy," said Langer. "Defended us to faculty members who thought this was ridiculous. And she shepherded us through, along with a lot of enthusiastic law students. Mostly women."

Crothers' foray into law started in a less conventional manner, she said, borne of her career in radical feminism and the women's liberation movement of the late 60s and early 70s. After a Women's Liberation meeting where Boylan spoke, Crothers began working at The Reporter as a jack-of-all-trades, she said.

When the periodical nearly faltered, Ginsburg was one of the people who supported it, said Crothers. And when Crothers decided to enroll in Rutgers-Law School of Newark, Ginsburg wrote her a sterling letter of recommendation, setting her down a path to a career as a civil rights attorney.

"She had no doubt that I was going to make this major contribution to the legal profession, which is just kind of hyperbole," recalled Crothers about the letter that landed her in law school.

For both Crothers and Langer, their days in the courtroom are behind them, having both retired from their legal careers. But the two both mourned Ginsburg, for her impact on the world and on them.

"She's irreplaceable," said Langer. "She's an incredible human being and an incredible lawyer

and a very important person in the history of the women's rights movement. And in my life, too."

As both former lawyers watched the news coverage of Ginsburg's death, they remembered how the then-law professor helped them along the way. With a national debate about her replacement already forming in the wake of Ginsburg's death, the two only hoped that people would remember what she had done for women's rights.