

# ‘How many people get to say they worked for their idol?’: Women in law remember Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s profound impact

Read the stories of women who knew the late justice



(Nikki Kahn/The Washington Post)

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<https://www.thelily.com/how-many-people-get-to-say-they-worked-for-their-idol-women-in-law-remember-ruth-bader-ginsburgs-profound-impact/>

Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the second woman to serve on the high court, died Friday. She was 87.

She served as an inspiration for a generation of feminists and was a legal pioneer for gender equality. In what appears to be her last public statement, Ginsburg said she was lucky to fight for women’s rights alongside generations of others well before society was willing to budge.

“It was my great good fortune to have the opportunity to participate in the long effort to place equal citizenship stature for women on the basic human rights agenda,” Ginsburg said in response to receiving the National Constitution Center’s Liberty Medal on Thursday. “In that regard, I was scarcely an innovator.”

The death was announced in a statement by the U.S. Supreme Court. She had recently been treated for pancreatic cancer. Within minutes, mourners began arriving on the steps of the Supreme Court in Washington, D.C., to pay tribute to her legacy.

Born in Brooklyn in 1933, Ginsburg excelled in school and went on to be one of just nine women in her class at Harvard Law School. Working in the 1970s with the American Civil Liberties Union,

she argued a series of cases before the high court that chipped away at gender discrimination. As a member of the Supreme Court, she was a reliable vote to protect the rights of women, affirmative action and minority voting rights, as well as a woman's right to safely access abortions.

At the news of her death, we reached out to women who knew her as a colleague, a boss and a mentor. They shared their thoughts on her legacy, and personal stories of Ginsburg's mentorship and friendship.

*Responses have been lightly edited for length and clarity.*

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I started my clerkship with Justice Ginsburg on my older son's 10th birthday. She was an inspiration and a mentor and a friend. The country is mourning one of its greatest jurists, I am grieving one of the best bosses I ever had. I cannot write a brief without applying the keen editing skills I gained from RBG to "get it right and keep it tight." She taught me it was possible to pursue justice and excellence in the law while raising a family. I will miss her profoundly.

*Ruthanne Deutsch is a founding partner of Deutsch Hunt PLLC and clerked for Ginsburg from 2007 to 2008.*

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A natural-born judge, she was not at all judgmental. Though she spent most of her career as a women's rights pioneer, working to ensure that other women would not, as she did, have to hide their pregnancies under baggy clothing to keep their jobs, she never made me feel she disapproved of my decision to exit the full-time legal market for 23 years while raising my children. Instead, she went out of her way to maintain my professional currency, asking me to speak at awards events and to write a biographical entry for her, and recommending me wholeheartedly for the job I eventually returned to.

This slow talker, ruthless editor and die-hard romantic wanted to make sure that every woman could find her best place, whether in a military-academy classroom, on the floor of a factory or behind the wheel of a minivan. She wanted the women who came after her to have the chance to get things — for themselves, as she did so often for herself — just right.

*Edith Roberts is an editor at SCOTUSblog and clerked for Ginsburg on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit. [Read her full tribute here.](#)*

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I consider one of the single greatest privileges and honors of my life to have served as Justice Ginsburg's law clerk. She was my idol. How many people get to say they worked for their idol?

One of my favorite stories comes from the year that I clerked for her. I joined the justice's chambers in the summer of 1999. The initial excitement of working for her soon turned to concern, for in the weeks leading up to the formal commencement of the court's term that year, the justice had her first bout with cancer. I recall vividly how the press simply assumed that her surgery and extensive treatment regimen, which begun just days before the formal start of the term, would keep her home and that she would listen to recordings of the arguments instead of attending them. I was fortunate enough to be first to arrive in chambers on the morning of Oct. 4, 1999 — the first day of oral

arguments that term — this meant I was the one who answered the phone when the justice called chambers from her car that morning.

“Amanda,” she told me, “call the chief [justice’s] chambers and make sure they know I’m coming.”



Ginsburg celebrates in 2013 the 20th anniversary of her appointment to the high court. (Nikki Kahn/The Washington Post)

This story speaks volumes about the justice’s courage, tenacity and commitment to her life’s work. That same commitment has carried her through her subsequent battles with cancer and, if I had to guess, had her reading briefs right up until the very end. She was a profoundly dedicated public servant in no small measure because she appreciated just how important her role was to ensuring that our Constitution belongs to everyone. Whether as an advocate or a justice, she tirelessly fought discrimination and more generally to open opportunities for every person to live up to their full human potential.

I am reminded today how one of her dear friends testified at her confirmation hearings that in “Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the president has offered the country a justice worthy of the title.”

I could not agree more.

*Amanda L. Tyler is a professor of law at the Berkeley School of Law at the University of California and clerked for Ginsburg from 1999 to 2000.*

Serving as one of Justice Ginsburg's law clerks in 2004 was a defining experience in my legal career. Although she hadn't yet become the popular icon that she became in recent years, I felt grateful and awed to clerk for her because of her achievements as an advocate fighting for women's rights. But she didn't ever talk about that work. She didn't tell war stories, and she rarely even talked about herself. Instead, she simply showed up every day and did the very best work she could. For her, that meant persistence: persistence in refining an opinion, over and over, until every unnecessary word had been excised and every nuance perfected; persistence in always reaching a principled legal result, even if it was not a convenient one; and persistence in being collegial and generous toward her colleagues, even in resolving the most fraught cases. That persistence is doubtless what enabled her, as an advocate, to craft an incremental legal strategy for achieving women's equality under the law, and to press her points before a skeptical, all-male Supreme Court. It is the most important lesson I learned from her, and it is something I strive to emulate in my own practice.

Show up every day, and do your very best work. That is what she did, no doubt, until [Friday]. She persisted, and now she rests.

*Ginger Anders is a complex litigation and appellate partner at Munger, Tolles & Olson LLP and clerked for Ginsburg from 2004 to 2005.*

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America has lost a national hero. But those of us who clerked for Justice Ginsburg have also lost a mentor, a teacher and a friend. Justice Ginsburg was a demanding and challenging boss. She aimed for perfection in her work — and she demanded the same from those of us who were lucky enough to clerk for her. Opinions would go through dozens — sometimes many dozens — of drafts. All memos, even internal memos, were expected to be carefully and thoroughly researched, well written and without typos. I remember slight pencil circles on even a misplaced comma in a quickly written note. Yet as hard as we clerks worked, she always worked harder. She was committed to big principles of equality and justice, but also to giving each litigant, even “pro se” litigants (those without lawyers), the full attention they deserved. The justice approached her personal interactions with the same generosity and care with which she approached her work. Unlike her husband Marty, the justice was never gregarious even with those who worked for her, but she was quietly and consistently supportive of her clerks and her staff. We will all miss her terribly and will work to honor her legacy.

*Kate Andrias is a professor of law at Michigan Law and clerked for Ginsburg from 2006 to 2007.*

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She was my favorite professor at Columbia Law School and I also worked with her when I was the clinical director of the ACLU Women's Rights Project and she was one of four general counsel. We taught a gender discrimination seminar at Columbia together, meeting with students once a week, and then having the students work on cases at the ACLU Women's Rights Project under my supervision. One of my favorite memories is that we held the last class of the gender discrimination course in my apartment on the Upper West Side. Ruth and I taught the class in my living room, while her husband, Marty, and my husband, Mike, cooked dinner for the class in my kitchen. We thought it was a great finish to a gender discrimination class.

I also was lucky enough to be able to attend one of her arguments before the Supreme Court when I was a student. She invited our class to join her in Washington for the event. What struck me was how respectful and attentive the justices were when she got up to argue before the court. She had argued before them a number of times, they knew her work and they treated her with great deference. She stood up there, a tiny person, but a huge presence.

*Margaret L. Moses is a professor of law at Loyola University Chicago School of Law.*

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The last communication that I had from her I had emailed, maybe two months ago, because we were both so sad that there was no opera this summer. I had come across a letter from her on my desk that had her opera dates for 2020 and I told her that I was going to cross out 2020 and put in 2021 and that I expected her to be with me at the opera. And she wrote back that she wanted a report on her New Mexico skies — that's what she always said, her New Mexico skies.



Ruth Bader Ginsburg, 1978. (Lynn Gilbert)

She was so wonderful. Every time she came [to New Mexico,] even though it was supposed to be her vacation, she let us take advantage of her time in any way. She read to children, she went to legal groups, women's groups, she was always understanding how precious it was for us to have somebody like her in New Mexico. And she appreciated the culture in every way. It was our diverse culture that was part of what she believed in and fought for.

I think it's so important, people think about her as a fighter for women's rights, which was true, but what she really was about was a fight for human rights. And one of the things about New Mexico I most love is at our best in New Mexico, we celebrate the beautiful differences in each of our cultures. And that's what she was trying to do in the law: Make sure that every human being had a chance to live to their full potential. Which is what America promises.

*Roberta Cooper Ramo is an American lawyer at Modrall Sperling, the first female president of the American Bar Association and a longtime friend of Ginsburg.*

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Fifty-one years ago, 1969 or so, Ann Marie Boylan came to a women's meeting in Manhattan and wanted to start what eventually became the Women's Rights Law Reporter [at Rutgers Law School] and I went to work with her on that. Ruth became our faculty adviser and during the period when we were trying to develop a periodical that would be helpful to regular women, not just lawyers, we were operating outside the law school. [When we tried to secure outside funding, we were told the] women's movement was a fad and would be gone in a year. By the time we were publishing the first issue, we were in a basement room in the law school and Ruth had helped us get that. She also wrote a letter of recommendation for me to go to Rutgers. I entered as a class of '71 based on the work with the Reporter.

Many years later, there's a group called the Veteran Feminists of America — people who worked in the '60s and '70s — and there's a lawyers contingent. So we had a lawyer day. And she came and Wendy Williams from Georgetown was interviewing her, she was the lunchtime speaker. And she came in her tiny little self, with her little fishnet gloves — black fishnet gloves. And she sat up there and it was just after she'd started to read her dissents from the bench. And so Wendy Williams asked her, "So what does this mean when you do this?" And of course, one of the things about Ruth Ginsburg was her sense of timing. And these long pauses, that she would wait when she was asked a question in a setting like that.

So she waited a long time and then she said, "It means I am very, very angry."

*Diane Crothers is a former student of Ginsburg and a retired civil rights attorney.*

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Ruth Ginsburg was on the faculty at Rutgers Law School (Newark) when I entered as a first-year student in 1970. Through the years she has played a pivotal role in my life.

When I heard that a fledgling law journal in Newark, the Women's Rights Law Reporter, was out of funds and unable to recruit staff, I organized a group of women law students at Rutgers to bring the journal to Rutgers Law School — then affectionately known as the People's Electric Law School. I met with the dean at the time, James Paul, who told me Rutgers would allow publication of the Reporter if we satisfied three conditions: We would have to find space, funds and a faculty adviser. I had heard that Professor Ginsburg was interested in women's rights and had been

working with the ACLU women's project, so I made an appointment to speak with her. Much to my surprise, she agreed to take on the role of faculty adviser. It was a real pleasure to work with her. She was smart, dedicated and meticulous. She was always there when we needed her to advocate for our new and unproven journal when we had difficulties with the administration. And she was a tough taskmaster.

*Elizabeth Langer is a former lawyer who is now a painter living and working in Manhattan.*