

Susan Bloom, *Remembering “The Notorious RBG”: Ruth Bader Ginsburg, JERSEY’S BEST, 22-23 (Winter 2020)*



Remembering The 'Notorious RBG'

Ruth Bader Ginsburg

Former Rutgers Law School students and colleagues reflect on her life and legacy.

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BY SUSAN BLOOM

Long before Ruth Bader Ginsburg became one of the most powerful figures in the fight for women's rights and equality, she began establishing her legacy right here in New Jersey. As one of only two female tenured professors at Rutgers Law School at the time, she became the first adviser for the Women's Rights Law Reporter, which she helped found with Rutgers law students in 1970 and now represents the nation's first and oldest legal journal devoted to women's issues. Years later, the trail-blazing attorney, judge and famed Supreme Court Justice would try and set precedents in myriad landmark cases, many of them centered on women's rights in America.

But what was it like to know and work with the force of nature affectionately known as "Notorious RBG?" In the wake of Ginsburg's passing on Sept. 18 at age 87, several of her former colleagues and students share insights on her work style, character and enduring legacy.

"I entered Rutgers School of Law in Newark in 1970 and was one of 60 women comprising the largest class of law school women in the U.S. at the time — 20%," said Elizabeth Langer, Ginsburg's student and editor-in-chief of Women's Rights Law Reporter from 1970 to 1972. "Though the notion of a legal journal focused on women's issues was a novel and fairly radical idea, it was a time when women began seriously questioning their roles and the 'Women's Liberation Movement' had begun to take hold, and Ruth immediately agreed to take on the role of faculty adviser," Langer said.



Photo courtesy of Diane Crothers

Former Rutgers Law School student and Women's Rights Law Reporter team member Diane Crothers, far left, with Ruth Bader Ginsburg during a Rutgers Law School celebration honoring Ginsburg in 1995.



Photo courtesy of NJ Advance Media

The late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg is applauded at the podium upon her induction to the National Women's Hall of Fame in 2002. Ginsburg was the second woman to be named to the highest court in the United States.

"She devoted countless hours to helping get our fledgling journal off the ground, writing and editing, counseling the staff, attending meetings and inevitably mediating problems that arose with the administration. She lent credibility to our effort, and her comment on *Reed v. Reed* appeared as the lead article in the first issue we published at Rutgers," said Langer, who also credits Rutgers Law School for hiring Ginsburg in a tenure track position in 1963 — a bold move for an academic institution at that time.

Diane Crothers, a retired civil rights lawyer and aspiring novelist who graduated from Rutgers Law School in 1974, helped launch the Women's Rights Law Reporter alongside Ginsburg, Langer and fellow student and visionary initiator Ann Marie Boylan. "I audited Ruth's course on 'Women and the Law' as an undergraduate, and Ruth wrote me a letter of recommendation to get into Rutgers Law," Crothers said. "Ruth had intellectual independence, tenacity, focus, and drive and empowered all of us to challenge things we were taught that were misogynistic. Though she was tiny in size, she stood up for all women and was strategic in her ability to develop arguments that men could understand, identify with and be moved by."



Diane Crothers, a former student of Ruth Bader Ginsburg at Rutgers Law School and a Women's Rights Law Reporter team member.

Photo courtesy of Diane Crothers

When Frank Askin entered Rutgers Law in 1963, it was Ginsburg's first year teaching there and he was a student in her Civil Procedure class, which he thoroughly enjoyed because of his background as a newspaper reporter. "Ruth and I spent most of the class in dialogue," he said. Following his graduation in 1966, he was offered a position on the Rutgers Law faculty based on his outstanding academic record and ended up teaching Civil Procedure. "Ruth and I became colleagues from 1966 to 1972; she was my mentor and someone I looked to for guidance," said Askin, who remained a professor at Rutgers Law until his retirement in 2016. "We both also served as legal counsel of the national ACLU and always thought alike on the issues."

Graduating from Rutgers Law in 1970, Askin's wife Marilyn described Ginsburg's teaching style as "totally focused" and credits her former professor with both helping her to get into Rutgers Law (as at the time, spouses weren't allowed to enroll in the school if their husbands were on the faculty) as well as providing critical support following her graduation. "Ruth ultimately found me a caregiver for my children so that I could pursue my legal career," Marilyn said.



Elizabeth Langer, a former student of Ruth Bader Ginsburg at Rutgers Law School and editor-in-chief of Women's Rights Law Reporter from 1970 to 1972.

Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Langer

"Ruth was smart, precise, tough and a risk taker," Langer said. "She had no patience for inferior work product, and no detail was too small. She was also exceedingly shy and rarely spoke much in social settings, but her reserved demeanor didn't prevent her from forging onward as a law student and mother of a young child at a time when women weren't welcomed at law schools, as a newly minted lawyer graduating at the top of her class at a time when women were actively discouraged from seeking law firm positions, or as an innovative thinker willing to take a leap into the then-uncharted territory of women's legal rights."

"As Ruth became comfortable with her position on the Supreme Court, her demeanor evolved and she became more approachable, sharing stories about her inability to cook, her commitment to regular gym workouts, and her love of attending the Washington Opera," Langer said. "Her personal life became a significant part of her persona and enabled her to build a bridge to a new generation of young activists, which I feel is as important to her legacy as her historic decisions and famous dissents."

"Ruth was a brilliant individual," Askin said. "She helped create a name for Rutgers Law School and was truly an anchor." ♦



Professor Frank Askin, Rutgers Law '66, and his wife Marilyn Askin, Rutgers Law '70, who were both students and colleagues of Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

Photo courtesy of Rutgers Law School