

Ruth Bader Ginsburg's life makes the most sense when it is placed inside the America she actually entered rather than the America that existed when she became famous. She was born Joan Ruth Bader in Brooklyn, New York, in 1933, into a Jewish family that valued education, discipline, and persistence. Her mother, Celia, was one of the strongest forces in her early life and pushed the importance of independence and learning, even though opportunities available to women of Celia's generation had been limited. Ruth lost an older sister when she was very young, and her mother died from cancer shortly before Ruth graduated from high school, leaving achievement tied to grief from an early age. She later carried her mother's lessons with her into spaces where women were expected to be quieter, less ambitious, and more accommodating than men. That background mattered because Ginsburg's legal career would eventually become centered on the simple but radical idea that the law should not assign a person's future based on sex. She did not arrive at that idea through slogans; she lived long enough inside the restrictions to understand how ordinary and respectable discrimination could appear when society had grown used to it.

She attended Cornell University, where she met Martin Ginsburg, the man who would become her husband and one of the most important partners in her life. Their marriage stood out because Martin did not appear threatened by Ruth's intellect or ambition, and she did not treat marriage as a reason to make herself smaller. They married in 1954, had children, and navigated careers at a time when expectations surrounding husbands and wives were far more rigid than they are today. Martin later became a highly respected tax lawyer, but throughout their marriage he supported Ruth's work in a way that was unusual enough to matter historically. When Martin became seriously ill with cancer while they were young, Ruth helped care for him, raised their child, attended her own law-school classes, and helped keep up with his coursework as well. That period is often told as evidence of her endurance, but it also reveals something about the partnership itself: they operated as though each person's work mattered. The marriage became part of the foundation that allowed her to continue moving through institutions that were far less supportive.

Ginsburg entered Harvard Law School in the 1950s as one of only a handful of women in a class filled overwhelmingly with men. Women were still treated as though their presence in elite legal education required explanation, and female students faced questions about why they were occupying places that supposedly could have gone to men. Ginsburg performed exceptionally well anyway, later transferring to Columbia Law School when her husband's work took the family to New York. She graduated near the very top of her class and served on major law reviews, which should have made the beginning of her career easy. It did not. Law firms that eagerly hired men with similar or weaker credentials often refused to hire her because she was a woman, a mother, and Jewish. The discrimination was not hidden behind complicated legal theories. Employers simply believed women did not belong in certain professional roles or would eventually leave to care for children. Ginsburg therefore learned early that ability does not automatically defeat a system built to discount the person possessing it.

She eventually entered academia and legal teaching, including work at Rutgers and later Columbia, where she became one of the first women to hold a full professorship at the law school. During this period, she began studying how laws treated men and women differently, and she became deeply involved in litigation challenging sex discrimination. The legal language of the time often presented unequal treatment as protection. Women might be excluded from certain jobs because the law supposedly wanted to protect them from harsh working conditions, denied financial independence because husbands were assumed to provide for them, or treated differently in matters involving property, employment, and benefits because traditional family roles were built directly into the rules. Ginsburg recognized that these laws could harm men as well as women because a system assigning one sex the role of provider and the other the role of dependent restricts both. Her legal strategy developed around exposing those contradictions gradually, case by case, rather than asking the Supreme Court to overturn every sex-based distinction at once.

Her work with the American Civil Liberties Union became especially important. Ginsburg helped establish the ACLU's Women's Rights Project in the early 1970s and became one of the central architects of modern constitutional arguments against sex discrimination. The Constitution does not contain a sentence simply saying men and women must always be treated identically, so the challenge was to persuade courts that the Equal Protection Clause, which requires government to justify unequal treatment under the law, should apply seriously to discrimination based on sex. Ginsburg understood that judges living inside traditional assumptions might resist a sweeping argument presented too aggressively. She therefore selected cases carefully, often choosing situations where the unfairness of the law could be seen clearly without requiring judges to accept an entire social revolution in one afternoon. This was legal strategy through accumulation: establish one principle, allow it to become familiar, then build the next case on top of it.

One of the cleverest parts of that strategy was using male plaintiffs in some cases involving sex discrimination. If she had brought only cases involving women being denied opportunities, some judges might have dismissed the issue as a narrow request for special treatment. By representing men harmed by sex-based rules, Ginsburg demonstrated that rigid gender roles were the real problem. In one important case, a man who had cared for his deceased wife's child was denied a Social Security benefit that would have been available to a woman in similar circumstances. The law assumed caregiving belonged naturally to women and wage earning belonged naturally to men. By attacking that assumption, Ginsburg could show that sex discrimination was not simply women demanding advantages; it was government deciding what men and women were supposed to be before looking at who they actually were. That approach helped move constitutional law toward a stronger requirement that governments justify sex-based classifications with genuine reasons rather than tradition alone.

The courtroom style she developed matched her broader personality. Ginsburg was not known for theatrical performances, shouting, or trying to overpower judges through force of personality. She was precise, patient, heavily prepared, and careful about

language. Her arguments often worked by making discrimination appear increasingly unreasonable until the old rule became difficult to defend without exposing the stereotype underneath it. That restraint was not weakness. It reflected an understanding that persuasion sometimes works better when the listener is allowed to believe the conclusion was reached through logic rather than humiliation. Ginsburg knew the judges she was trying to persuade had grown up inside many of the assumptions she was challenging, so she often built bridges rather than demanding immediate confession. Over time, those bridges changed constitutional doctrine.

Her legal philosophy also developed through experiences outside the United States. Ginsburg spent time in Sweden during the 1960s working on comparative law and observed a society where women were more visibly integrated into professional and public life. Comparative law means studying and comparing different legal systems, and seeing another country organize gender roles differently helped reveal that many American customs were not biological necessities. If another society could structure work, parenting, education, and public life differently, then American tradition could no longer be defended simply by saying things had always been that way. Ginsburg's thinking therefore became less about asking women to fit into a male-designed system and more about examining whether the system itself had been unnecessarily built around assumptions about sex. That perspective would remain visible throughout her career.

In 1980, President Jimmy Carter appointed her to the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, one of the country's most influential federal appeals courts. A federal appeals court does not normally retry cases or hear witnesses from the beginning. Instead, judges review decisions from lower courts and determine whether the law was interpreted and applied correctly. Ginsburg spent thirteen years there, developing a reputation for careful reasoning and a relatively restrained judicial style. She was not yet the cultural symbol she would later become. In fact, she was sometimes viewed as more moderate and cautious than people later remembered, especially because she believed courts should move carefully when making broad constitutional changes. That caution reflected her earlier litigation experience, where she had learned that legal victories become stronger when principles are built steadily enough to survive beyond the case that created them.

President Bill Clinton nominated Ginsburg to the Supreme Court in 1993, making her the second woman ever to serve on the Court after Sandra Day O'Connor. Her confirmation was overwhelmingly bipartisan by the standards of later judicial battles, and she joined an institution where nine justices interpret some of the most difficult constitutional and federal legal questions in the country. Supreme Court justices do not simply decide whether they personally like a law. They interpret constitutional provisions, statutes passed by Congress, prior court decisions, and legal principles developed across generations. Because Supreme Court decisions can shape the law nationwide, a justice's reasoning can affect voting, criminal procedure, civil rights, business regulation, reproductive rights, government power, and countless other parts of American life.

Ginsburg brought decades of experience studying equality into that environment, but she also understood that a justice is different from an advocate. As a lawyer, she had chosen cases and argued for clients; as a justice, she was responsible for judging disputes brought before the Court.

One of her most important majority opinions came in *United States v. Virginia* in 1996, involving the Virginia Military Institute, known as VMI, which had excluded women from admission. Virginia defended the male-only policy partly through claims about different educational methods supposedly suited to men and women. Ginsburg wrote the Court's opinion rejecting that exclusion and requiring an "exceedingly persuasive justification" for government classifications based on sex. The language mattered because it demanded more than vague tradition or generalized assumptions. Government could not simply say men and women are different and use that statement as permission to distribute opportunities unequally. The case fit naturally with work she had begun decades earlier: the law should evaluate individuals rather than assigning them roles because of broad stereotypes about their sex.

Her later fame, however, grew increasingly from her dissents. A dissent is an opinion written by a judge who disagrees with the majority decision. A dissent does not control the immediate outcome of the case, but it can explain why the losing side believes the Court made a serious mistake and sometimes provides reasoning that future courts, lawmakers, or citizens may later adopt. Ginsburg became especially known for writing dissents in cases involving voting rights, workplace discrimination, reproductive rights, and other civil-rights questions. She sometimes announced particularly important dissents from the bench, a rare act signaling deep disagreement with the majority. The phrase "I dissent" eventually became part of her public image, but the important point was not rebelliousness for its own sake. She viewed dissent as part of the judicial conversation, preserving an argument when she believed the Court had taken the law in the wrong direction.

The case of *Lilly Ledbetter* became one of the clearest examples. Ledbetter had worked for Goodyear and later discovered that she had been paid substantially less than male coworkers performing similar work. The Supreme Court ruled against her claim because of the way the filing deadline under federal law was interpreted. Ginsburg dissented and argued that pay discrimination can accumulate quietly over years because employees may not know what coworkers are being paid. She also pointed toward Congress as the institution capable of correcting the law. Congress later passed the *Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act*, which changed the legal rules surrounding discriminatory pay claims. The episode showed how the branches of American government can interact: the Supreme Court interprets a statute, a dissent explains why that interpretation may produce unfair results, and Congress can then amend the law if enough elected lawmakers agree.

Her dissent in *Shelby County v. Holder* in 2013 became another of her most widely discussed opinions. The case involved a major provision of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 requiring certain jurisdictions with histories of voting discrimination to obtain federal

approval before changing election rules. The Supreme Court's majority invalidated the formula used to determine which jurisdictions were covered. Ginsburg believed removing that protection while it was still preventing discrimination made little sense, famously comparing the decision to throwing away an umbrella because one was not getting wet while standing underneath it. The image became memorable because it translated a complicated voting-rights dispute into ordinary logic: a protection working successfully can make the original danger less visible, but reduced visibility does not necessarily mean the protection is no longer needed. Whether one agrees with her conclusion or not, the dissent demonstrates how she used concrete language to make constitutional disagreements understandable beyond the legal profession.

Ginsburg's relationship with Justice Antonin Scalia became another important part of her public story because the two disagreed sharply on many constitutional questions while maintaining a genuine friendship. Scalia was a conservative justice known for originalism and textualism, approaches emphasizing constitutional meaning at the time of adoption and close attention to statutory text. Ginsburg generally approached constitutional equality and precedent differently, so the two could end up on opposite sides of important cases. Yet they attended the opera together, traveled, shared meals, and enjoyed one another's company. Their friendship did not erase philosophical disagreement, nor did disagreement require personal contempt. In an increasingly polarized political culture, that relationship became almost as educational as some of their opinions because it demonstrated that intellectual opposition does not automatically make another person an enemy.

Her public image changed dramatically late in life. Younger generations began calling her the "Notorious RBG," a playful reference to rapper The Notorious B.I.G., and images of Ginsburg wearing her judicial collar appeared on shirts, mugs, posters, tattoos, and internet memes. The transformation was unusual: an elderly Supreme Court justice who had spent most of her career writing technical legal opinions became a popular-culture figure. Part of that admiration grew from her dissents and her history fighting sex discrimination, while part came from the contrast between her small physical stature and enormous institutional role. She also became known for an intense exercise routine that she maintained despite repeated health problems. Yet the celebrity image sometimes simplified her, turning a complicated lawyer and judge into a symbol of resistance. Ginsburg herself contained more contradiction than a slogan could hold, and understanding her requires going back to the careful strategist underneath the merchandise.

Her health became a major part of her later years because she survived several bouts of cancer while continuing to work. She was treated for colon cancer, pancreatic cancer, and later additional cancer complications, repeatedly returning to the Court after surgery and treatment. Her determination to remain on the bench inspired admirers, but it also became part of a serious political debate. Some supporters wished she had retired during Barack Obama's presidency while a Democratic president and Senate might have replaced her with a justice holding similar views. Ginsburg chose to remain, believing

she could continue doing the work and resisting the idea that political calculations should dictate her departure. After Donald Trump became president and Republicans controlled the Senate, the consequences of that decision became far more significant.

Ginsburg died on September 18, 2020, from complications of metastatic pancreatic cancer at the age of eighty-seven. Her death occurred only weeks before the presidential election, immediately creating a fierce battle over the vacant Supreme Court seat. President Trump nominated Amy Coney Barrett, and the Senate confirmed Barrett shortly before the election. Because Barrett's judicial philosophy differed substantially from Ginsburg's, the ideological balance of the Court moved further to the right. That transition became especially consequential in later cases involving abortion and other constitutional questions. For Ginsburg's admirers, her decision not to retire earlier therefore remains one of the most difficult parts of assessing her legacy because a justice who had spent decades building legal protections also left a vacancy that helped create a Court more likely to reconsider some of the doctrines she valued.

The controversy does not erase what came before it, but it prevents the story from becoming worship. Ginsburg was a brilliant lawyer and enormously important figure in the development of sex-equality law, yet she was still capable of strategic misjudgment. She also faced criticism during her life for comments she made about political figures and public controversies, and she occasionally apologized when she believed she had spoken improperly. Her record should therefore be studied with the same seriousness she brought to legal reasoning: respect the achievement without pretending achievement eliminates error. Great public figures become more useful when we allow them to remain human because then their decisions can actually teach us something.

Her most lasting work began long before the Supreme Court celebrity years. When Ginsburg entered law, many rules openly distinguished between men and women based on assumptions that men would earn money, women would care for homes, men would lead families, and women would depend upon them. She did not try to destroy those assumptions through one dramatic lawsuit. She spent years choosing cases that exposed the contradiction inside them, persuading judges to recognize that a government supposedly protecting women could also be denying them independence, while a government supposedly privileging men could also trap them inside rigid expectations. The genius was in gradually changing what seemed legally normal. Once courts began accepting that sex classifications required serious justification, the burden shifted. Government could no longer rely as easily on saying, "This is simply how men and women have always been treated."

That transformation reaches into ordinary life in ways that can be difficult to see precisely because many of the old restrictions have become unfamiliar. A woman applying for a job, managing her own financial life, attending professional school, entering military education, demanding equal treatment under public law, or expecting government benefits to be administered without crude gender stereotypes lives inside a legal environment partly shaped by battles Ginsburg helped fight. She did not create

gender equality by herself, and generations of activists, lawyers, lawmakers, organizers, workers, and ordinary women pushed those changes forward alongside her. What she contributed was an unusually disciplined constitutional strategy capable of carrying those demands into courts that were not automatically prepared to accept them.

Her life also demonstrates something deeper about how institutions actually change. Dramatic speeches can awaken people, but law often moves through briefs, precedents, procedural rules, definitions, carefully selected plaintiffs, and arguments constructed one sentence at a time. Ginsburg understood that transformation sometimes has to become familiar before it becomes permanent. She could challenge a powerful tradition without always making the challenge sound like war. That patience did not mean accepting injustice quietly. It meant understanding the institution well enough to know where pressure would be most effective.

The little girl from Brooklyn who lost her mother before graduation eventually became a lawyer when major firms did not want women like her, a professor when elite legal education was still overwhelmingly male, an advocate who helped reshape constitutional equality, a federal appellate judge, and one of nine people entrusted with interpreting the highest law of the United States. Her path was not smooth enough to support the fantasy that talent automatically receives opportunity. She repeatedly encountered institutions that could recognize excellence in theory while refusing to recognize it in her. Instead of allowing those refusals to become proof that she did not belong, she learned the institution deeply enough to challenge its own reasoning from inside. That may be the most enduring part of Ruth Bader Ginsburg's story: she did not merely enter rooms that had been designed without women like her in mind. She learned how those rooms worked, mastered their language, and spent the rest of her life changing the rules by which the doors were opened.