

## **Finally, a Better Replacement for Thurgood**

With the nomination of Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court, President Obama has given a gift to the Black community as well as the Latino community. Judge Sotomayor will be a better replacement for Thurgood Marshall, the Court's first Black justice. The choice of Justice Marshall's replacement on the Court, Clarence Thomas, was rightfully seen as an insult to the nation's communities of color.

Some people are worried that Judge Sotomayor's background will affect her decisions; that judges should be mere umpires in deciding cases before them. But all judges bring with them life experiences that have formed them before they were appointed. It is impossible to be otherwise. Judge Sotomayor's detractors are worried that being a Puerto Rican woman will affect her judgment. But that is equally so for white male justices – their experiences affect their worldview and view of the law, although no one seems likely to point this out.

Just as Thurgood Marshall's mere presence affected the other justices – all white – in determining cases of racial discrimination, Sonia Sotomayor will bring a new perspective to the Court. It is unlikely that any of the current justices – before they were appointed - had the experience of interacting with a Hispanic professional on an equal basis, never mind a Hispanic woman. The diversity that Judge Sotomayor brings to the Court will have a liberating influence on a powerful institution that for too long failed to be representative of the people whose lives they affect.

Judge Sotomayor is, as Senate majority leader Harry Reid said, "The whole package. We could not have anyone more qualified." From her background as a poor child from a single parent home – to her intellectual qualities honed at the finest educational institutions – to her years of experience on the federal bench as both a trial and appellate judge – to her Latina heritage, Sonia Sotomayor will bring a unique perspective to the Court, one never before present.

### **A Powerful Presence**

As a member of the board of directors of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund (PRLDEF) for more than 10 years, I came to know Sonia Sotomayor personally. While she was a board member, she worked actively with the organization's lawyers on issues such as New York City hiring practices, housing discrimination, public school finances, and voting rights. When the Supreme Court takes up issues involving immigration, election laws, racial discrimination, and sexual harassment, Judge Sotomayor will be a powerful presence when the justices discuss and decide these cases.

Community Service Society's General Counsel Juan Cartagena was a staff attorney at the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund at a time when Sonia Sotomayor was on PRLDEF's board. He points to the length of time that Sotomayor served on the board, from 1980 to 1992 when she resigned to become a federal judge. This was an extraordinary amount of support – both volunteer and financial – to the organization. It shows a real commitment to social justice.

It is not surprising that Sonia Sotomayor would gravitate toward PRLDEF, since it is the major legal organization in the United States that fights discrimination against Puerto Ricans. Discrimination takes many forms and Sotomayor, a lawyer, used the law and her legal expertise to counter discrimination and help further integrate Puerto Ricans into society. In doing so, she joined many of those born in the United States of Puerto Rican heritage who became lawyers.

**A gift to the  
Black community**

When Judge Sotomayor is approved by the Senate, she will be the Court's first Hispanic justice and its third female justice. As for her qualifications, she has been a federal judge for 17 years, longer than any of the current justices when they were appointed to the Supreme Court. Before her nomination to the Supreme Court, Sotomayor was appointed to federal judgeships by both Republican and Democratic presidents. George H.W. Bush nominated her to the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York and Bill Clinton nominated her to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit.

Sonia Sotomayor had known from the time she was 10 that she was going to be a lawyer. She wasn't one to accept life as it was handed to her. Just as Barack Obama becoming president electrified so many young people, Sonia Sotomayor's ascent to the Supreme Court should provide a lesson that all young people, especially New York's young people of color, can take to heart.

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David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 160 years. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer. The Urban Agenda is available on CSS's website: [www.cssny.org](http://www.cssny.org).

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