

# The Aspirations of Sonia Sotomayor



Directions: Read the passage about Sonia Sotomayor below, then answer the questions that follow using evidence from the text.

“Experience has taught me that you cannot value dreams according to the odds of their coming true. Their real value is in stirring within us the will to aspire.”

— Sonia Sotomayor

## Introduction

Have you ever thought about what you wanted to be when you grow up? Perhaps typical career paths, like becoming a doctor, nurse, or teacher have come to mind. But have you ever considered becoming a Supreme Court justice? Do you know what that is? There are currently only nine Supreme Court justices permitted at one time, so it is not surprising if you have never considered it!

One of the most recent appointees, Sonia Sotomayor, never dreamed of becoming a Supreme Court justice when she was growing up. Even though it was something she could not have imagined as a child, in 2009, President Barack Obama nominated Sonia to become the first Latina Associate Supreme Court justice in U.S. history.



Puerto Rico is an island located southeast of Florida. It is a territory of the United States. People born there are United States citizens.

## Early Life

Sonia's parents were born in Puerto Rico, and moved to New York before Sonia was born. Sonia was born in the Bronx on June 25, 1954. Her mother was a nurse, and her father worked in a factory. She had a younger brother who she affectionately called Junior. Her abuelita, her father's mother, helped raise her, teaching Sonia her native language, Spanish. Since Spanish was Sonia's first language, she struggled to learn English while growing up. To build her confidence in the English language, she joined a Bible-reading group and read Bible verses aloud.

During her youth, Sonia enjoyed reading all types of books, from comic books to encyclopedias. One of her favorite series was about an inquisitive, crime-solving detective named Nancy Drew. When Sonia was seven years old and dreaming of becoming a detective, she was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes. In order to survive, she had to take an insulin shot every day, which she quickly learned to give to herself. This was frightening for her because her dream of becoming a detective disappeared with her diagnosis. At the time, people could not be police officers if they had diabetes, and she needed to become a police officer before becoming a detective.

Not long after her diagnosis, Sonia decided to become a lawyer who stood up for people who needed help. She arrived at this decision after watching a famous, but fictional, television lawyer, Perry Mason. Sonia loved watching Perry Mason argue his cases in the courtroom, and thought it was amazing that there were people who worked to help others in this way.

Sadly, while Sonia was still young, only nine years old, her father passed away.

## Education

Sonia's education began at home when her mother introduced her to a set of encyclopedias, which Sonia read daily. She became fascinated with the words and information, and always wanted to learn more.

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Sonia graduated high school with honors and applied to an Ivy League college on her guidance counselor's recommendation. Though she was unfamiliar with Princeton, she chose to attend this prestigious university with the help of a scholarship.

While studying at Princeton, she was unafraid to ask questions, even if they made her seem unknowledgeable. When describing her experience at the school, she said the university seemed like a different world. For example, when a friend commented that Sonia sounded like Alice, Sonia didn't understand the reference. Even though she knew it would make her appear to be uninformed, she asked her friend who this Alice was. Her friend kindly explained that she meant Alice, from the book *Alice in Wonderland*. At the time, Sonia had never heard of the story, but by asking the question, she learned more about Lewis Carroll's classic work of literature.

Much of her time at Princeton was filled with studying hard and adapting to her new environment. With the new surroundings came new ideas. Sonia had the ability to share her own ideas, shaped by her childhood upbringing, with people who did not look or sound like her.



The U.S. Supreme Court was established by the Constitution to provide a checks and balance to the President and to Congress. The Supreme Court interprets U.S. laws by way of court cases.

## Prosecuting Her Way to the Supreme Court

After becoming a lawyer in 1980, Sonia joined the District Attorney's office in Manhattan. Sonia worked as an Assistant District Attorney (ADA), interviewing victims and witnesses and evaluating the evidence surrounding crimes. As the ADA, she worked as a prosecutor, which is someone who brings cases against people who have broken the law. She worked as an ADA for four years, before joining the law firm Pavia & Harcourt in 1984.

Even while working for the private sector, she still did pro bono work, where she would represent people for free. Sonia served on the board of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund, the New York City Campaign Finance Board, and the State of New York Mortgage Agency. A few years after she joined the private firm, Senators Ted Kennedy and Daniel Patrick Moynihan noticed her pro

bono work and helped her get nominated as a judge.

There are many levels in the court system. President George H.W. Bush nominated her to become the youngest U.S. District Court judge for the Southern District of New York City in 1992. After she served in that position for five years, President Bill Clinton nominated her to become a judge in the U.S. Second Circuit Court of Appeals in 1997. While working in the court of appeals, Sonia began teaching law as an adjunct professor at New York University in 1998, and at Columbia Law School in 1999. Then, in 2009, President Barack Obama nominated Sonia Sotomayor to become a Supreme Court Justice.

## Supreme Ideas as a Judge

After all her work as a student, lawyer, and judge, she was prepared to make decisions on landmark cases. The Supreme Court makes decisions that can affect the whole country, since they settle disputes between the federal government and citizens, or handle controversial cases.

While the odds of a Latina who did not speak English well as a child becoming a Supreme Court Justice might have seemed unlikely in the past, Sonia's appointment changed that. She paved the way for other women to

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

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pursue their dreams, including aspiring to be in the highest court of the United States. No matter the obstacles she encountered, like language barriers, a health crisis, and the death of her father, Sonia continued to aspire to new heights and pave new pathways to her success. It was not with luck, but with hard work and perseverance that she reached the position she currently holds.

Who is Sonia Sotomayor?	What year was she born?
What experiences did Sonia have throughout her life?	
What is an important obstacle she overcame?  How did she overcome the obstacle?  How does this obstacle connect to why she is famous?	
What changes has Sotomayor made in the world that makes her influential?	