

July 2015

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Recommended Citation

Emily Gold Waldman, *A Triumphant Day in Pace Law School's History: Justice Sonia Sotomayor's November 12, 2012 Visit to Our Campus*, 35 Pace L. Rev. 1134 (2015)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58948/2331-3528.1907>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pace.edu/plr/vol35/iss4/4>

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A Triumphant Day in Pace Law School's History: Justice Sonia Sotomayor's November 12, 2012 Visit to Our Campus

Emily Gold Waldman*

“Read through and then we can discuss. Don’t forward to anyone,” stated a March 2012 e-mail from Dean Emeritus Michelle Simon to me. The e-mail’s subject line was unremarkable – “FW: Your Pace Visit” – but its actual subject was anything but: Associate Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor had officially agreed to visit Pace Law School. It was time for intensive planning to begin. The fruition of that planning – Justice Sotomayor’s full-day visit to our campus on November 12, 2012, the first-ever visit of a Supreme Court Justice to Pace Law School – was a wonderful highlight of Michelle’s deanship.

The seeds for this visit were first laid in 2011, during a lunch between Justice Sotomayor and the late Jo Ann Harris. Jo Ann, the former head of the Department of Justice’s criminal division, had served as a longtime Scholar in Residence at Pace Law School, during which time she started our Federal Judicial Honors Program, placing our students as externs with the numerous federal judges (including then-Second Circuit Judge Sotomayor) who she knew. Even after she no longer remained “in residence,” Jo Ann always remained loyal to our law school, looking for opportunities to help us in any way possible. So, when she caught up with Justice Sotomayor for lunch, she naturally mentioned Pace. In

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response, Justice Sotomayor, who had been giving numerous commencement addresses, suggested something new: conducting a panel with several of our most illustrious Federal Judicial Honors Program alums.

Michelle immediately convened a small group – including Steve Goldberg, Bridget Crawford, and me – to create a draft schedule for the potential visit. As we brainstormed, Michelle emphasized that she wanted the program to be student-centered. Yes, we would set aside portions of the visit for the Justice to meet with faculty, alumni, lawyers and judges. But the top priority was to give our students exposure to Justice Sotomayor – and to make it, as I recall Michelle saying, “a really special day for them,” something they would always remember. After much discussion, we came up with a draft schedule for the day, centered on a 90-minute Q & A that Justice Sotomayor would hold in the Moot Court Room for “students only” (yes, this was underlined in the draft proposal we sent to Justice Sotomayor). And, in March of 2012, we heard back: Justice Sotomayor liked the plan – with, of course, some comments and alterations – and it was time to implement it. “I’d say you’ve hit one ‘over the fence,’” Jo Ann wrote to Michelle. “Now the hard work begins: running the bases.”

Over the next eight months, we fleshed out and finalized every detail of the day. Justice Sotomayor wanted to share the stage with three of her former Federal Judicial Honors Program interns, and she selected Patrick Petrocelli ‘09, Nicholas Menasche ‘06, and Karin Anderson ‘00 to join her. We decided that the 90-minute Q & A program would include two parts: a roundtable discussion among Justice Sotomayor and the three former interns; and then questions for Justice Sotomayor from our law school student audience.

Who would ask those questions, and what would they be? With Michelle’s blessing, we invited all students to submit as many questions as they wanted for consideration. Those students whose questions were selected would be guaranteed a prime seat in the Moot Courtroom and an opportunity to ask their questions themselves. The remaining seats would be distributed by lottery.

The student response was fantastic. We received over 100 questions from our students, and our planning committee

ultimately narrowed the list down to approximately 20, which we sent to Justice Sotomayor for review. The questions touched on judicial philosophy (for example, Annmarie Stepancic '15, asked "How does the public's opinion on a particular issue influence your approach to judging?") to biography (Eugene Sosnovskiy '15, asked "If you didn't enter the legal field, what other kind of career would you have chosen to pursue?") to Justice Sotomayor's own advice regarding oral argument (from Joseph Randall '13: "when you observe an oral argument, what types of things do attorneys do that make them successful and unsuccessful in presenting their cases?"). After getting Justice Sotomayor's approval, we notified the chosen students, who were thrilled. Hundreds of other students entered the lottery for the remaining Moot Courtroom seats.

The actual November 12 visit was a whirl of activity. In addition to the 90-minute Moot Courtroom Q & A with students – which played to a "standing room only" crowd – Justice Sotomayor attended receptions with our Board of Visitors, university dignitaries, alumni, and local federal judges. But what particularly stands out to me is that we remained true to Michelle's vision of prioritizing our students throughout the day. Apart from the Moot Courtroom event, Justice Sotomayor also held two smaller student Q & As: one with the Latin-American Law Student Association (LALSA) and one with our current Federal Judicial Honors Program students. These sessions were smaller and more spontaneous; students had the chance to talk with her about their own questions and hopes, and Justice Sotomayor responded candidly and eloquently. I am confident that the students will long treasure their memories of the visit. Michelle led us all in creating, planning, and executing one of the proudest, most exciting days in Pace Law School's history.