

What We Know

ARTICLES & INSIGHTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Bettie Kelley Sousa](#) has been practicing law with Smith Debnam since becoming licensed in 1981. She has a wealth of experience in state and federal courts, including bankruptcy courts, at both trial and appellate levels. She represents mostly business owners and businesses --- large and small --- in a variety of matters, including contract review, drafting and disputes.



“MAKE THE TURN” – Reflections on the life of Ruth Bader Ginsburg

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By now, you’ve heard many of the memorable words of wisdom of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who defied the odds of pancreatic cancer while continuing to work tirelessly at the Supreme Court of the United States for the positions she advocated. Far from rolling over, RBG dissented when her opinions were at odds with her brethren, which was often. A dissent, she has said, is just an opinion that has not reached its time. At Smith Debnam, we’ve sought out thoughts about RBG from our female attorneys, most of whom can relate to RBG’s tales of law school and work while mothering when “*sleep [is] a luxury.*” Perhaps because I was the first woman with a law license at the firm, I gather those thoughts and add my own to share.

“Women belong in all places where decisions are being made.”

Seeing RBG in person surprises most folks. Pictures do not emphasize just how small she was. Many of us saw her for the first time when we were sworn in at the Supreme Court, a special ritual requiring little more than a modest fee and paperwork confirming a few years of experience, a couple of references, and a clean bar record. Most lawyers are admitted in groups, sponsored about once a year by bar associations and law schools, which secure the spots well in advance. A typical ceremony includes a brief introduction in the courtroom to the full panel of SCOTUS judges by the group leader (the bar president or law school dean), the taking of an oath, and often a group-financed reception in a magnificent, portrait-heavy, high-ceilinged room across from the courtroom. If you have a pulse, you’ll get chills from this event. Justice Ginsburg visited our reception, as did Chief Justice Roberts, on November 13, 2007, when my husband and I were admitted. I know this date not because it’s seared in my memory, but because we each ordered a nice frame and our SCOTUS admission certificates hang in our home. I’ve never argued a case in the Supreme Court, and likely never will; but, like so many others, I’m proud of my admission and stand ready if needed.

Suzanne Reynolds, Dean Emerita of our law school alma mater, Wake Forest, became acquainted with Justice Ginsburg, and has shared many experiences with her. In 2005, Justice Ginsburg came to the law school (as have other SCOTUS justices) and was interviewed by then Professor Reynolds. That connection blossomed into a friendship

with Justice Ginsburg, who along with her husband, Marty, a tax professor, shared their legal knowledge and love of travel at the Wake Forest Venice House for summer sessions for law students. After Marty's death, Justice Ginsburg returned to Venice and in addition to lecturing and working with students, she presided over a mock appeal of Shylock, the Jewish moneylender in Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice." (Her love for performances was also revealed when she and her friend, Justice Scalia, made cameo appearances in operas.) In perhaps Justice Ginsburg's last visit to North Carolina, Professor Reynolds, a Meredith College graduate, interviewed RBG in Raleigh in September of 2019. Recently, I watched a recording of that Meredith interview. One year before her death, RBG was sharp, funny, never silly, and genuine.

"Make the turn."

Justice Ginsburg shared her time and talents with other law schools, but her Wake Forest Venice connection was special. At a dinner celebration, a year or so ago honoring former WFU law professor Charley Rose, forty or so guests were each asked to share a story about him. The stories got better as the wine flowed, and two other professors told stories about one of the Venice summers with Professor Rose and Justice Ginsburg. In one, for some reason, Justice Ginsburg was with "the men" in a car driven by Dean Blake Morant. As I remember it, they were driving parallel to a canal, en route to another event (an opera) with little time to spare, when RBG looked out her window, spotted a "scarf" in the window of a store, and wanted Dean Morant to go there. The only way to get to the store was to make a U-turn. But, once in the lane, the Italian signage prohibited such a maneuver. The men somewhat desperately debated how to deal with the dilemma, when a quiet but firm voice from the back seat commanded the obvious, law-disregarding solution, "*Make the turn.*" And, of course, they did. (I suspect she was teasing when—the story goes—once in the store, she tried on the "scarf" and asked her man-team very matter-of-factly and without cracking a smile, "*does this make me look fat?*")

"Make the turn" will never be published in a book of Ginsburg quotations. But it is this side of her that I find most endearing. Her erudition, her steadfast commitments, and her brilliant writings never overshadowed her practical thinking. And, it was this ability to think and articulate simple, practical examples to support her legal ideals—no doubt honed from years of needing to prove herself for the sake of all the women who would follow her—that paved the way for the successes she achieved.

In the Meredith interview, she shared how the term "gender discrimination" supplanted "sex discrimination." RBG had a secretary/typist at Columbia Law School, who suggested that in making her arguments to men, RBG drop the word "sex" because it might be distracting. This nod to practicality, with the goal of bettering her arguments, ushered in a term now found in regulations and Supreme Court opinions.

"This child has two parents. Please alternate calls."

Her practical thinking was revealed in an early victory in the lower courts when she focused on discrimination not against a woman, but a man. In championing a case where her client held a traditionally woman's role—taking care of his 89-year-old mother

—RBG determined that the statute, which allowed a tax deduction from the IRS to be claimed by women, or widowed or divorced men, discriminated against her client, who had never married. Importantly, she didn't seek to strike the statute (which would have taken away the deduction for women), but to determine that it should be applied equally, regardless of gender. This case led to other cases in which she picked male plaintiffs.

And Justice Ginsburg applied this sense of equality in her own life. After staying up all night working during law school, at a commanded appearance the next morning at her son's grade school class for his misbehavior, RBG told the principal, "*This child has two parents. Please alternate calls.*" (As you might guess, fewer calls were made to their home.)

As someone of a generation of female lawyers who recall concrete examples of gender discrimination at work, in cases, and in courthouses, I am humbled to think how far our country has come in the four decades of my legal career. Being labeled a "feminist" must not have rattled RBG. If she ever raised her voice in frustration, she was adept at avoiding microphones and cameras. While society is not "there" yet, thanks to the brilliant and practical mind of Ruth Bader Ginsburg and her tireless advocacy, our daughters and granddaughters (and yes, our sons and grandsons) have a better chance of equality. May she finally enjoy a good night's sleep.

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From [Connie Carrigan](#), a partner in the firm, with a practice concentration in Business and Employment Law.

When my sons were young and completely uninterested in learning about what their Mom does for a living, my family accompanied me at my swearing-in ceremony before the United States Supreme Court. It has been one of the highlights of my legal career to join the ranks of those who have walked those hallowed halls and presented cases in that grand and stately courtroom. At the reception after our swearing-in ceremony, I was thrilled to meet Justice Ginsburg as she had served as a role model, trailblazer, and inspiration to me and to so many women during her tenure on the Supreme Court. The icing on the cake, however, was the look of awe I witnessed in my sons' eyes as they participated in this experience. On the day Justice Ginsburg died, both of my sons called me. They were as upset as I was. Her legacy will continue to resonate in the lives she touched and improved, mine included.

From [Elizabeth Blackwell](#), partner and member of the firm's Corporate and Business law practice group.

One of my favorite quotes from RBG is – "*In every good marriage, it helps to be a little deaf...when a thoughtless or unkind word is spoken, best to tune it out. Reacting in anger or annoyance will not advance one's ability*

to persuade." She would be the first to admit, she was an awful cook. In fact, her husband, Marty (also a lawyer) was in charge of all of the cooking. I'm an awful cook as well, and my husband (an equally busy doctor) has kindly taken on that role. The kitchen has become a special place for us because that is where he proposed. One of my favorite Marty quotes is *"As a general rule, my wife does not give me any advice about cooking and I do not give her any advice about the law. This seems to work quite well on both sides."* RBG said that Marty was *"by far the most fortunate thing that has ever happened to me."* I feel the same way about my spouse. When we are working in such a demanding and mercurial profession, it is helpful to have a supportive partner who believes in you and is your biggest fan.

From [Christina McAlpin Taylor](#), partner and member of the firm's creditors' rights practice group.

Justice Ginsburg impacted my life in many ways. She paved the way to allow women and others to feel equal. I love her story about telling the school principal at her son's school that he had two parents. She asked them to start rotating who they called. This is still an issue in today's society but Justice Ginsburg paved the way for me to make sure my husband and I pull equal weight when raising our kids. Though, I certainly still take on more of the home responsibilities but that is by choice.

From [Anna Claire Turpin](#), associate and member of the firm's family law group.

I admired RBG's humor, wit, and her ability to forge relationships with those who didn't hold the same opinions as her. The world today seems so divisive; RBG found value in confidently speaking her mind but enjoying the challenges and lessons from others. I love her quote *"You can disagree without being disagreeable."*

From [Melissa Tulis](#), associate and member of the firm's creditors' rights practice group.

Justice Ginsburg famously said: *"I would like to be remembered as someone who used whatever talent she had to do her work to the very best of her ability."* Although I frequently fall short of this standard, I aspire to live by these words. I strive not to take for granted the hard work of Justice Ginsburg in paving the path for all women and especially for women in the legal profession. Justice Ginsburg was an unrelenting force. Her life has inspired generations of women, not just to enter, but to *thrive* in a historically male-dominated profession.

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