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## A Judge's Own Story Highlights Her Mother's

By [SCOTT SHANE](#) and [MANNY FERNANDEZ](#)  
 Published: May 27, 2009

WASHINGTON — The morning [Sonia Sotomayor](#) was confirmed as a federal appeals court judge in 1998, she began calling her mother to share the good news. Her brother, Juan, joined in the hunt, and they kept calling all day long, exasperated and a little concerned until they finally reached her at home in the evening.

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The White House  
 Celina Sotomayor, left, with her daughter, Judge Sonia Sotomayor.

It turned out that their mother, a nurse who had become a sort of one-woman social services agency for her sprawling apartment complex, had spent the day accompanying an ailing neighbor to the doctor.

It was classic Celina Sotomayor, a glimpse of the indefatigable woman who overcame stark deprivation in Puerto Rico during childhood, escaped by way of the military during World War II, was widowed at an early age, and supported her two children on their way to professional success in law and, for Juan Sotomayor, medicine.

Mrs. Sotomayor, 81, was not hard to find on Tuesday, the day [President Obama](#) chose her daughter for the [Supreme Court](#). She was the one weeping copiously on national television as Sonia Sotomayor expressed her gratitude.

“I have often said that I am all I am because of her, and I am only half the woman she is,” Judge Sotomayor said, in a moment of raw emotion that has resonated with mothers and daughters far beyond the White House.

“I thank you for all that you have given me and continue to give me,” she continued, addressing her mother and stepfather, Omar Lopez.

President Obama referred to Judge Sotomayor’s “extraordinary journey” from an East Bronx housing project to the federal appellate bench. But her mother’s life, beginning on the impoverished island where she was born in the farming community of Lajas in 1927, seems as compelling in its own right.

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As a schoolgirl, Celina Baez told friends, she and her four siblings had only one pencil to share; it was guarded by her parents and doled out carefully. She memorized her lessons by pretending to teach them to the trees behind her modest home, assigning a pupil's name to each one and wielding a stick as a pointer.

In those days, Judge Sotomayor recalled in a lengthy tribute to her mother at the 1998 appeals court ceremony, the island's per capita income of \$200 was less than a quarter of that in the poorest state, and the literacy rate was 39 percent.

From that meager start, Celina's life grew tougher. Her mother, bedridden with health problems for years, died when Celina was 9, and her father promptly abandoned the family. Celina was raised by her older sister, Aurora, in San Germán, P.R.

She escaped at 17 by enlisting in the Women's Army Corps, arriving in Georgia for training in 1944, speaking little English and unfamiliar even with how telephones worked. After her service, she married another Puerto Rican, Juan Luis Sotomayor, who went to work as a tool-and-die worker while she completed her high school equivalency certificate at James Monroe High School in the Bronx.

Mrs. Sotomayor got a job at Prospect Hospital, a small private facility in the South Bronx where she would spend 35 years. She started as a telephone operator, and with the owner's encouragement, obtained a practical nurse's license.

Mr. Sotomayor's death of a heart attack at 42, when Sonia was 9, made Mrs. Sotomayor the family's sole support. She scrimped to put the children through Roman Catholic schools and to buy the only set of Encyclopaedia Britannica in their Bronx housing project.

"My brother and I plagiarized many a school report from those books, but I can remember the enormous financial burden that purchase placed on my mother," Judge Sotomayor recalled in 1998.

When the family moved to Co-Op City in the late 1960s, a definite step up, Mrs. Sotomayor took the smaller of the two bedrooms, dividing the larger one for Sonia and Juan, neighbors remembered.

Sonia Sotomayor's friends remember her mother as a strict parent who insisted on hard work at school and kept a close eye on who her children's friends were. "They had their rules," recalled Jeanette Valdespino-Torres, a childhood friend of Judge Sotomayor. "She worked, and basically no one was allowed out of the house until she came home from work."

1 | [2](#) | [NEXT PAGE »](#)

*Scott Shane reported from Washington, and Manny Fernandez from New York. Reporting was contributed by Eric Lichtblau in Washington, David Gonzalez and Colin Moynihan in New York and Carmen Gentile Jr. in Margate, Fla. Kitty Bennett contributed research from Washington.*

*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

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(Page 2 of 2)

But she also made visiting teenagers feel valued, recalled Kenneth K. Moy, a friend of Sonia at Cardinal Spellman High School. "She would really listen, and she treated the teenager as someone with the chops to make a decision," Mr. Moy said.

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The apartment, he said, was "a welcoming and communal place," where members of the Sotomayors' extended family often seemed to stop by for counsel. "When people in the family had troubles or concerns, they'd come to Celina and say, 'What do you think?'"

Despite the demands on her as a single mother, recalled Dinorah Tirado, a friend and Co-Op City neighbor for many years, Mrs. Sotomayor never complained. "Never, never," Mrs. Tirado said. "She never said, 'It's hard,' or 'I can't make ends meet.'"

At the sprawling apartment building, she became unofficial medical consultant, Mrs. Tirado said. When another neighbor had cancer, Mrs. Sotomayor would rise early each day before work to make and deliver her breakfast. Friends turned to her with every ailment.

"Whoever was sick rang the doorbell," Mrs. Tirado said. Mrs. Sotomayor, she recalled, even "removed my cat's stitches."

During Sonia's junior year at Cardinal Spellman, her mother sat the two children down and proposed that she go to college to earn her registered nurse degree, increasing her income to make up for the impending loss of her late husband's [Social Security](#) benefit.

"My mom was like no student I knew," the judge wrote in 1998. "She got home from school or work and literally immersed herself in her studies, working until midnight or beyond, only to get up again before all of us."

Mrs. Sotomayor became Prospect Hospital's emergency room supervisor until the hospital closed in the mid-

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1980s. She then worked at a methadone clinic in the South Bronx until **retiring in the early 1990s, not long after she met Mr. Lopez. They married and now live in a retirement community in Margate, Fla., where Mr. Lopez works in an auto parts store.** Mrs. Sotomayor takes morning walks with a friend, Sylvia Gutierrez, who said they talk about movies or music — “no politics, no religious stuff.”

A gaggle of reporters was waiting in the rain when Celina Sotomayor arrived home on Wednesday afternoon from Washington.

Not for the first time, and not for the last, she spoke of her pride in her daughter, alternating English and Spanish.

“She was always intelligent and focused,” the mother said.

Did she believe her daughter would get through the Senate confirmation process without trouble? “Esperamos,” she replied — We hope.

As for her own role in raising the possible future Supreme Court justice?

“I don’t know what I did,” Celina Sotomayor said. “I was just there.”

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