

Five years short of her 90th birthday, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, an Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court, has become a national pop icon. Visit Amazon, type her name, and watch merchandise -- t-shirts, iPhone cases, coffee mugs, socks -- pop up for sale. As if that weren't confirmation enough of her cultural status, Justice Ginsburg may be the only member of the Supreme Court in our nation's history to have attained a starring role in a big screen film. This summer, filmmakers Julie Cohen and Betsy West released the critically acclaimed documentary, *RBG*, which chronicles the Justice's life. The film experienced sold-out screenings nationwide, including multiple sell-outs at the Lake Theatre here in Oak Park. The film, which received an astounding 94 percent on Rotten Tomatoes, provides viewers a glimpse into why Justice Ginsburg is beloved by so many.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who joined the United States Supreme Court as only its second female justice, enjoyed a path-breaking legal career prior to serving in the federal judiciary. Her most important contributions to American law arguably preceded her time on the bench. She litigated six cases before the Supreme Court, all touching, in some manner, the 14th Amendment's equal protection guarantee, and each based upon the principle, as she argued in one of the cases, that "men and women are persons of equal dignity and they should count equally before the law." As NPR legal correspondent Nina Totenberg stated in *RBG*, "Ruth Bader Ginsburg changed the way the world is for American women."

While preparing for a summer internship in Washington, D.C., I decided to write a letter. A letter that I thought would never receive a response. Six days later, an envelope from the Supreme Court sat on my kitchen counter. Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg accepted my request to interview her. At 4:00pm on a Wednesday, I walked from the Russell Senate Office Building to The United States Supreme Court. These edited excerpts from my conversation are based upon five questions (none of which could touch upon former, current, or future Supreme Court cases) that were pre-approved by the Court's Public Information Office:

*Music, as the old saying goes, is the universal language. But unlike Hip Hop or Rap music, opera -- a passion of yours -- is an unfamiliar "language" for many 17-year olds, like myself. I'm wondering if you could describe how and when you first fell in love with opera, why the language of opera speaks so deeply to you, and how teenagers like myself might best be able to learn that language?*

***I was turned on to opera at age 11. My aunt who was a middle school teacher in Brooklyn, New York took me to a high school to see a production of an opera. It would not be my choice of a first opera for a child. Nonetheless I was pulled over by the gorgeous music and the high drama. I never experienced anything like it and that's when I became hooked on opera. The year was 1944, the conductor was a man named Dean Dixon. He was an African American and his mission was to introduce children to beautiful music so he got an all-city orchestra with many of the instrumentalists coming from Harlem. He left the United States in 1948 and he said, "In all the years I have conducted" -- and he conducted a variety of orchestras -- "no one has ever called me Maestro." So he left, went to Europe, and he married well. He didn't come back to the United States until 1968, so it was twenty years that he was gone. When he came back,***

**every major symphony orchestra in the country wanted him as a guest conductor. I think that illustrates the change in U.S. society from 1944 to 1968. So how do I think people should be introduced to opera? In just that way. I think it's exposure with someone like Dean Dixon who can give the students some idea of what the opera is about.**

*In the midst of your ninth decade, you've become a national pop icon. Might you be able to describe how you first learned that the films creators, Betsy West and Julie Cohen, were planning to make a documentary film about your life, whether you or your family either embraced or were skeptical about the concept, and how life has changed for you both since the film's release as well as the advent of the Notorious RBG moniker?*

**Notorious RBG started before the documentary, and it was started by a second year student at NYU law school. She was very angry about the court's disposition of the Shelby County case. Shelby County declared unconstitutional a vital part of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In the bad old days, if a district or a state had been keeping African Americans from voting it couldn't make any change in their voting laws without preclearing it either with the Department of Justice's civil rights division or with a three judge district court. That check, that preclearance was working very well. But the court held that the formula was outdated because things had changed since 1965 and some districts that were once discriminating were no longer discriminating. My answer in dissent was that the 1965 civil rights act had a built in escape for states that had improved. That is if they had a clean record for x number of years they could get off from this appropriate check. Shana who was one of the two creators of Notorious RBG was at first very angry, and then she thought anger is not going to get me any place so I should do something positive. She put up my dissenting opinion on Tumblr, and then Notorious RBG took off from there. Betsy and Julie came to me with their idea of a documentary, and they spent two years following me around through various events. I had agreed without hesitation because I had seen a documentary they did for PBS called The Makers. The Makers was about the women's movement in the 1970's and I thought they did a fantastic job with that film series. So when they came to me with this proposal I said, "Okay let me give you a schedule of events where I'm speaking and you can decide what you would like to do." I think the last time they were with me was in Santa Fe where I go every summer for the opera.**

*And are you enjoying the spotlight?*

**(Laughs) Well at first I was amazed by it -- that anybody would be interested in viewing a documentary about someone my age. And then I was amused by the profusion of RBG items that you can now get. I must say I became a great grandmother on January 21st and I ordered two onesies with RBG on them.**

*Sheryl Sandberg, the best-selling author and COO of Facebook, has famously urged our nation's women and girls to "Lean-in" -- raise our hands in the classroom, speak-up in the*

*workplace, advocate for ourselves. But since reading her book a few years ago, and since seeing your film a few weeks ago, I've begun to wonder whether there's an important second directive that ought to be urged upon our nation's men and boys, "Lean-out" -- participate more outside of the workplace, chip-in lots more in the household, move out of traditional classifications of who should be doing what. That seems like a book that your beloved husband could have written. Do you have any thoughts about whether your husband's example of what I'll call "Leaning-out" is as unusual today as it was a generation or two ago when you first met?*

***It is hardly as unusual as it was. The case that I litigated in the 70's had what I thought was wrong with the stereotyping of people. Women's job was the home and the children. Men's job was to earn bread for the family. Breaking down those stereotypes is what we were trying to do. And so Wiesenfeld was a key case. The case dealt with a young man whose wife died in childbirth. He applied for child and care benefits -- that is if you were a surviving spouse you got benefits for the child and for the parent -- but when Stephen went to the Social Security office he was told these are mother's benefits not fathers' benefits and he didn't qualify. He wrote a letter to the editor of his local newspaper in New Jersey and his tagline was "Does Gloria Steinem know about this?" I was teaching at Rutgers at the time. A professor in the Spanish department lived in the same town as Stephen Wiesenfeld and she called me, and I said suggest to Mr. Wiesenfeld that he contact the New Jersey affiliate of the American Civil Liberties Union and that's how the case was started. The Supreme Court was unanimous in judgement, but divided three ways under reason. The plurality thought it was discrimination against the woman as waging because women pay the same social security taxes as men but their taxes don't get the same benefits. A couple of them thought it was discrimination against the male as a parent because the male parent would have no option to work part time and get social security benefits to allow him to support himself and his child. And one judge thought about the baby. Why should the baby have an opportunity to be under the care of a sole surviving parent if that parent is female, but not if that parent is male. It was a perfect case to illustrate what was wrong with the stereotypes. Today there is parental leave. I just came back from a trip abroad in which two of our police officers accompanied me. One of them is now going on a four-month paternity leave. Things still haven't progressed far enough. There are many more men who have a close relationship with their children than was once the case. I feel sorry for the men who concentrate on their work life and then their child goes off to college and they realize they've missed the opportunity to have a close relationship with their child. I will say if I could have any affirmative action program it would be to encourage men to relate to children, to become grade school teachers, kindergarten teachers. If all fathers related to their children the way my son-in-law and grandson do, the world would be a much better place.***

*Young people today are growing up with social media technology that makes it easy for us to find online, and only associate with, friends who are just like us, and, on the other hand, ignore or attack those who are not like us. In Justice Antonin Scalia, you famously developed a long and a strong friendship with someone who was not like you, at least not like you with regard to*

*some of the most important aspects of each of your lives -- religion, judicial philosophy, and, maybe, political party affiliation. This might be a hard, or even an impossible question to answer, but do you think a friendship like yours and Justice Scalia's would have even come to fruition if each of you grew up in a world, such as ours today, so dominant with social media?*

***It's important if you are an advocate for a cause to understand the other side's point of view. When this court meets in our conference room, you will not see a laptop, you will not see an ipad, and we will just have our conversation among the nine justices. They're not recorded. No one can enter the room while we're conferring and there's something useful with that. Dealing with each other face to face and trying to be as persuasive as one can. You really can't be persuasive without understanding what the argument is on the other side. I think back to the days when I was a strong advocate of the equal rights amendment. I tried to sit with the people who were opposed so that I could understand their point of view which would enable me to be more persuasive. With Justice Scalia, our friendship was based on many things that we had in common. For one, we both grew up in New York. He grew up in Queens. I grew up in Brooklyn. For another, we both really cared about families. We started together on the Court of Appeals before he was appointed to The Supreme Court. We sat in panels of three and Scalia would sometimes whisper something or send me a note that cracked me up because it was so funny. I had to do all I could to keep from bursting out into hilarious laughter. The counsel would certainly be troubled if I did that, thinking his argument must have been totally ineffective. In any case, another thing we shared is we both labored over our opinions. We cared about stating our reasons in a way that could be understood at least by other lawyers and judges. Sometimes he would come to my chambers and he would point out that I had made a grammatical error. Scalia's father was a professor of Latin at Brooklyn College and his mother was an elementary school teacher so he was a very good grammarian. I would sometimes suggest to him that he should tone down the language of his opinion because it was so strident that he would lose people he was intending to persuade. We also shared a passion for opera. Scalia and I were the supers on the stage a couple of times for the Washington Opera. So we had all of those things in common and we always had an annual New Year's Eve party. Scalia was a great hunter. He would catch Bambi for us and my husband would cook something delicious out of it. One time Scalia caught not a deer but a wild boar and that was a challenge for my husband to find a recipe to make it edible. When Scalia died, his son and former law clerk put together a collection of his speeches and articles, and his son Christopher asked me to write the introduction. I consider that to be something wonderful. Instead of asking one of Scalia's conservative friends his son decided to ask me to write the introduction.***

*If you could transplant your 17-year-old self to today, what would she say both to your 85-year-old self and to other other 17-year-olds (girls and boys) of today?*

***I hope that you care about the society in which you live. Try to join with others who want to do something to make things better. Join an environmental group, a civil rights group,***

***a group concerned with the abolition of the death penalty. And in the current climate, recognize that we are a country of immigrants and the greatness of the United States is, in part, due to a variety of backgrounds that we have. So there are a number of things that I hope today's young people care about. Most of all: voting. It's shocking how few young voters showed up to the polls last midterm elections. Right now, I would encourage young people to do anything to join efforts to get people to register to vote and then go to the polls on election day.***