

Op-ed | We All Should Honor Ruth Bader Ginsburg

by Peter G. Verniero

Why are countless Americans mourning the passing of a person they've never met?

Why, in such a divisive period in our history, are bipartisan tributes being paid to a sometimes shy, soft-spoken woman who seemed more comfortable reading and writing in private than speechifying in public?

The answer: Because the late Ruth Bader Ginsburg's self-assigned mission was not to seek attention or influence for herself but rather to advance principles of equality for the betterment of others. And when she started that mission, it had to be self-assigned because so few of her brethren understood the true meaning of inequality for women, let alone were committed to its eradication.

So when a smart, selfless and single-hearted person like Ginsburg passes, we rightly want to celebrate her life and contributions — not only as a pioneering lawyer and uniformly respected jurist but as a spouse and parent balancing career and home in a way that men of her age were not called on to do.

It is a testimony to Ginsburg's sense of right and wrong that we applaud her tenacious drive for equal justice. But we also are taking this otherwise sad occasion to remind ourselves why we admired her in the first place.

And it is perhaps because of today's political divisiveness that we yearn to celebrate Ginsburg's calm, civil discourse. Her brilliant legal mind. Her courage in the face of cancer. Her friendships across the jurisprudential spectrum. Her ability to write dissenting opinions while respecting the views of the justices in the majority — and vice versa.

I first met Ginsburg when she dedicated the new Rutgers Law School building in Newark in 1999. She had been a member of the United States Supreme Court for about six years and I had been a member of the New Jersey Supreme Court for about six days.

She was the keynote speaker at the dedication in part because of her affiliation with Rutgers years earlier as a professor. I was there with my new state court colleagues to mark the opening of a facility for our state's flagship public law school.

Things that I remember from the event: Ginsburg's graceful manner, the generous way she posed for pictures with me and others. She spoke plainly but powerfully. She was not one for engaging in small talk. She was one for engaging in "big talk" — for furthering bedrock principles like equal justice under the law.

You do not need to agree with every word Justice Ginsburg has ever written to respect that every word was grounded in her love for the rule of law and her faith that the system could correct itself when fairness demanded it.

It is fitting that we remember Ruth Bader Ginsburg for the example she set for all of us. Let us hope that with her death comes a renewal of the principles she steadfastly stood for in life.

Peter G. Verniero formerly served as a justice of the New Jersey Supreme Court and state attorney general.



U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg with retired and then-current members of the N.J. Supreme Court at Rutgers Law School in 1999. Top row from left to right: Justices Morris Pashman, Gary Stein, Virginia Long, Marie Garibaldi, James Coleman, Peter Verniero, Daniel O'Hern. Front: Justice Ginsburg, Chief Justice Deborah Poritz and Justice Alan Handler. Rutgers University