

# How Clemson brought Sonia Sotomayor to campus

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Clemson University professor Vernon Burton and Supreme Court Associate Justice Sonia Sotomayor go way back.

In the early 1970s, Burton said he hired Sotomayor as research assistant to help him with data entry while he was a graduate student at Princeton University. Though they came from vastly different backgrounds — he was from Ninety-Six, and she was from the Bronx — they found unity in their similar upbringings.

"I suspect I am the only historian who had a Supreme Court justice as a research assistant," Burton said. "And I was able, as a graduate student, to encourage her to not let it be overwhelming and to not let people put you down because of where you're from."

Still friends decades later, Burton — who is both a history professor and the director of the Clemson's Cyberinstitute — said he's followed Sotomayor's career all the way, from her time at Princeton to the Supreme Court.

She wrote about their friendship in

her memoir, "My Beloved World," and has spoken about his mentorship while delivering speeches, Burton said. Because it had become public knowledge they were pals, the dean of Clemson's College of Architecture, Arts and Humanities approached him earlier this year with a hefty request.

"Clemson has never had a Supreme Court judge speak here — that was a big deal," Burton said. "It's an extraordinary thing for her to take her very valuable time to come here and do this."

Sotomayor accepted Clemson's offer to speak, though she requested Burton moderate the question-and-answer session at the Brooks Center for the Performing Arts. Tickets for the event ran out shortly after her visit was announced in August, said Robin Denny, Clemson's director of media relations.

During the talk, Burton asked Sotomayor questions submitted by students in advance. Here's a few he received:

» Does Justice Sotomayor have a favorite anecdote of day-to-day life in the Supreme Court?

» Having worked in the public and

private sector, which part of Justice Sotomayor's career was the most rewarding?

» As a woman of color, how do you separate personal attacks in political arguments?

President Barack Obama nominated Sotomayor for the Supreme Court in May 2009, and she assumed her associate justice role less than three months later.

Prior to becoming a Supreme Court justice, she worked as the assistant district attorney in the New York County District Attorney's Office from 1979-1984. Several years later, President George H.W. Bush nominated Sotomayor to the U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York, a position she held from 1992-98.

"Her story is one that's so meaningful in America — of an immigrant family and hard work and sacrifice, belief in the American dream and the desire to make America a better place," Burton said.

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