



New York Stories: Sonia Sotomayor (3/8/19)

00:00:27 Alice M. Greenwald: Good evening. My name is Alice Greenwald. I'm president and C.E.O. of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum. And it is my distinct privilege to welcome all of you to tonight's very special program, which is taking place, as it turns out, on International Women's Day.

(applause and cheers)

00:00:53 Alice M. Greenwald: And what better way could there possibly be to observe this particular occasion than with our esteemed guest speaker this evening? As always, I am delighted to see our museum members in the audience, and I would particularly like to acknowledge U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York Geoffrey Berman.

(applause)

00:01:22 Alice M. Greenwald: We are deeply honored by the generous participation of tonight's speaker, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States Sonia Sotomayor. Justice Sotomayor was born in the Bronx, New York, on June 25, 1954. I don't usually give people's birthdates.

(laughter)

00:01:43 Alice M. Greenwald: She earned a B.A. in 1976 from Princeton University, graduating summa cum laude and receiving the university's highest

academic honor. In 1979, she earned a J.D. from the Yale Law School, where she served as an editor of the "Yale Law Journal," and thereafter she served as assistant district attorney in the New York County district attorney's office from 1979 to 1984. From 1984 to 1992, she litigated international commercial matters in New York City at Pavia and Harcourt, where she was an associate and then partner.

00:02:23 In 1991, President George H.W. Bush nominated her to the U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York, and she served in that role from 1992 to 1998. She then served as a judge on the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit from 1998 to 2009. President Barack Obama nominated her as an associate justice of the Supreme Court on May 26, 2009, and she assumed that role on August 8 of the same year.

00:02:59 On 9/11, Justice Sotomayor was sitting as a judge on the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit in Lower Manhattan. Tonight, we all are honored that she has come here to share her 9/11 story.

Following the justice's remarks, she will be joined by the Memorial & Museum's executive vice president and deputy director for museum programs, Clifford Chanin, for a short, moderated conversation. And concluding tonight's program, high school students from our Museum Ambassador Program will present questions to the justice on behalf of the audience.

00:03:38 Without further ado, please join me in welcoming Sonia Sotomayor, associate justice of the Supreme Court of the United States.

(applause)

00:04:13 (applause ends)

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: I don't want to stand there.

(laughter)

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: It seemed too distant from you. And I'm telling you a personal story, so I wanted to get closer. How's that? All right, um... You know, the tragedy, the tragedies of September 11, 2001, occurred close to 19 years ago. Much has happened since then, and so much in the world has been radically altered by that fateful day. The young kids who are ambassadors who I met earlier were not even born yet. They have no idea what differences were wrought in our lives.

00:05:02

Suffice it by one little story I'll tell. When I was growing up, and I went through hotel security, my family and I-- not hotel, airport security-- my family and I would travel back from Puerto Rico. And I love mangoes. And back then, you couldn't find Puerto Rican mangoes in New York City. So we had to smuggle some back.

(laughter)

00:05:30

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: And I remember one fateful trip back, my mother was carrying a wig box, and she had stuffed the bottom of the wig box with mangoes.

(laughter)

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: And placed her many wigs on top. Wigs were then in fashion, guys. The security guard, as she was walking by, felt the box, and obviously, it was heavier than normal, and he opened it. And I remember my heart stopping, and his hand was reaching into the box, and he looked at all the hair, he looked at her, he looked at us, and he decided we weren't dangerous. Closed up the box and let her through.

(laughter)

- 00:06:13 U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: Well, you guys know that's not security today. What happened after post-11 is the take-off-your-belt- and-your-shoes time, the checking of every item you have, the traveling with ounces of liquid onto the plane. It's a dramatic change from when I grew up.
- 00:06:35 But so much else has altered. I, likely as with anyone who lived that day and its aftermath, will never forget it. All persons who were alive then and of conscious age know where we... where we were when we heard the news, and how life-altering it was.
- 00:07:02 Early that morning, I was at an appointment at a Midtown office, so I wasn't in my courthouse. The phone rang, and the person with me picked up the phone. I saw a look of disbelief on her face. She turned to me and said, "A plane just hit the World Trade Center."
- 00:07:26 The weekend before, I had been at a street fair near my home, and I saw a booth that sold old photographs of New York. One of those photographs had a plane that had embedded itself in the side of the Empire State Building in 1945. That was the image that popped into my head, a plane was embedded in the side of the World Trade Center. I said to my companion that, "People had had to have died from that. How horrible." What words I spoke was from that image that was so false in my head. I did not grasp how immense the tragedy was.
- 00:08:19 It was only when I left the building and started walking towards the subway station when someone said, "All mass transit has been shut down in the city. You have to walk to where you're going." No cars were moving on the road. Everybody was pulled to the side. I stood next to a parked car with all its windows open, and the doors open, and the radio blasting, when I heard that one of the Twin Towers had fallen.

- 00:08:55 At that moment, the immensity of it finally struck me. I was, as you heard, a United States circuit court judge at the Second Circuit, whose office was located a mere blocks away from the World Trade Center. I was frantic on my cell phone. The lines had not just... had not yet fallen. I was trying first to reach my mother, who didn't live in New York, but who I knew would be frantic, wondering what was happening to me.
- 00:09:34 But the phone lines were busy. I tried everybody I knew, and everybody's line was busy. I finally got through to the courthouse, and I was told by the, by the court officer there that the building had been evacuated and everybody had been sent home. I asked if anyone had been injured, and his response was, "I just don't know what's happening."
- 00:10:05 And more questions I asked, I could hear the pleas in his voice for me to stop, because he just didn't know. But I wanted to know if my staff and the people I loved were okay. What made the matter so much worse was walking by people collapsed in the street, crying.
- 00:10:26 Fear and panic was evident in every face. I was in Midtown Manhattan, I lived in Lower Manhattan, I'm walking down Sixth Avenue, and someone says, "Where is the Empire State Building? We have to stay away from it-- it could be next." As I approached the hospital near my home, I saw a line of people wrapped around the building, standing to donate blood. I didn't stand on the line with them, because this was before the time they would take blood from a diabetic. Now they do, but they didn't back then.
- 00:11:09 Now, because my office was so close to the World Trade Center, I knew it was closed, because they had closed traffic below 14th Street, and I lived on Houston, which was essentially First Street. I needed-- thank God I had with me my I.D., so the police officers let me go home.
- 00:11:32 When I got home, thankfully, I had a landline telephone. I was probably one of the few of my friends who still had a landline phone. To this day, 18 years later, a friend of mine who has, knows my home, looked at me one day and said, "Why do you have a landline? Nobody else does." And my response was, "I will never give up that again. I lived through cell

phones dying." And so my line will be in my home so long as there have landlines in the world.

(laughter)

00:12:19 U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: But I was able eventually to reach my mother, who was, as I expected, frantic. I reached my assistant, who told me everybody who had made it to work that morning had made it out safely. But we had new law clerks, who had never, who had just arrived, and although I had a questionnaire for them to fill out when they arrived, we were a little lax then about making sure they filled it out. It was a questionnaire about who are your contacts for emergency, where do you live?

00:12:55 Because the personnel office had that, but our personal offices didn't have it unless I asked. We didn't have that info for them. 19 years later, the very first day my law clerks work in, walk into my office, they are sat down by, by my assistants and told, "Fill out that questionnaire." And it's put immediately in a file that I take home with me, because I will never live again without having contact information for people I care about. So those are the small things that change in your life.

00:13:40 Well, like everyone else who lived that time period, I was glued to the television, watching the events unfold. I eventually understood how so horrific an event that was. When I saw the buildings implode inward, I knew there would be no survivors.

00:14:13 I also knew that the world had changed forever. And we can't say the changes were all positive. The heightened security, the threats to our liberty, the invasions of everyone's privacy, not just by our government, but by world governments, by terrorist groups, all of these things have marked our living of today.

00:14:49 But I didn't want to come here and talk about that. Amazing, isn't it? Because I wanted you to understand that that event had a positive side. A positive lesson I took from it, and that's what I want to share with you today.

00:15:19 During the television coverage following September 11, the world could not miss the diversity of colors and backgrounds present in our New York City population. No other place in the world can boast that it has residents who represent every ethnic, racial, religious, or political group of the world.

00:15:44 You saw the burned, scarred face of an African-American woman who was one of the only two survivors from the Cantor Fitzgerald offices. You saw an Asian-American Port Authority police officer saved from under the rubble. You heard and saw the Irish priest who died while ministering to his fallen fire and police department colleagues. And you heard the story of the Hispanic fire department captain who ran into one of the burning buildings to save people and was the last person pulled alive from the Twin Towers before they collapsed.

00:16:35 We in New York live as a diverse community every day. We walk the streets side by side, we travel in subways and trains packed together like sardines. We worship together in our churches, our children sit side by side in classrooms. We toil together in offices and in buildings that empty out at the end of each day, looking like the exit of a General Assembly conference at the United Nations. No place else in the world does that.

00:17:10 In our diversity, we New Yorkers scare many people and even ourselves, sometimes. All of you have probably met people who proudly pronounce that they have never been to New York City and don't ever want to visit the city.

(laughter)

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: I can't imagine why, but...

(laughter)

00:17:34 U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: All of us who have lived here know about the trials in New York City involving racial assaults and killings. But... In one moment in the television coverage of September 11, I knew that all Americans had a moment of seeing past our differences and finally, primordially, understanding our commonality. It was a moment during a television interview of a Midwestern woman, who admitted that she had always thought New York City was a strange place and its people odd, but who had been watching us on television and said that she realized that we were just like the people in her hometown.

00:18:39 It took a tragedy like September 11 to remind us that the differences we project onto each other, and which so alienate us from each other, are superficial, and in the reality of tragedy, meaningless. On September 11, we stood as Americans and as human beings.

00:19:11 And we saw past our ethnic, religious, and gender differences, and responded to a common threat with a complete giving of heart, soul, and for some, of life. We as a nation found our hearts and souls in September 11.

00:19:37 What is our challenge today? Our challenge as Americans is to keep the spirit of giving we found on September 11. We have to keep it alive. We have to remember it, not the tragedy. We have to continue to be heroes to each other every single day. We must remember the critical lesson of September 11 always, and remember to stand united and face our problems and find solutions together as a community.

00:20:20 We did it that day, and on all the recovery months and years that followed, people flooded in from around the country and around the world to help. Donations followed for all of the families that were

stricken. We are capable of repeating that every day. We can do it. Our challenge is to continue being those heroes by remembering to unselfishly and openly participate and find solutions for the difficulties we face.

00:21:01

That is the most important part of September 11 to me. In my courtroom every day, I faced many of the legal challenges that September 11 wrought in its aftermath. They still appear in my courtroom. The pain and the suffering we all experience is emblazoned in my memory and the memory of anyone who witnessed the events of those days.

00:21:30

You can't walk through this museum without feeling that emotion. Yet next to this is my knowledge that we do not stand alone, and we can stand with one another past our differences. On September 11, the people of the United States and the world gave us a glimpse into the vastness of their souls and the generosity of their spirits. United we should stand, forevermore. That's my September 11 story.

00:22:16

(applause)

Clifford Chanin: This has been...

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: Well, Clifford, how are you?

Clifford Chanin: Very well, thank you.

(laughter)

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: I want to thank the September 11 Commission for hosting these events.

Clifford Chanin: Thank you.

00:22:41 U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: We don't often get a time or a forum to talk about memories like that.

Clifford Chanin: No, we don't, and we do take some pride in the fact that this a place where people do feel that they can speak as, not everyone as beautifully as you, but nonetheless as deeply from the heart and as deeply connected to these events, because, you know, we are in the presence of what happened here.

00:23:04 And as you know, and I should tell the audience that the justice has been here twice in the past year for visits of her own with friends and family, I believe. And so, you know, we were able to, you know. sort of see you experience this here, and you know, I... from what you said, and the way you speak about this city, it's clear that you still think of yourself as a New Yorker. And, you know, we will claim you as one of our own absolutely, but...

(laughter)

00:23:33 Clifford Chanin: But, you know, your message is extremely powerful, it, it, it rings very true to our experience here. You're a national figure, you travel around the country. I wonder if you feel a resonance for the kind of message you delivered, the, the lesson that you take from it around the country. Do you see the 9/11 impact that you describe in the people you meet out in, beyond New York?

00:23:59 U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: There is no question that it wasn't just New Yorkers glued to the television. Everyone I know from around the country, and around the world, who lived through that day will talk about what they were viewing and what they were seeing and what they were feeling, and how enormously impactful it was to everyone in the world.

00:24:21 I mean, we see tragedies every day, and people see tragedies every day, but that was something beyond people's imagination as a tragedy. We're used to wars, you know-- that's a horrible thing to say. We're used to independent violent killings and deaths. We get accustomed to the norms of our lives. But that was extraordinary in a way that I think has impacted everyone who was a part of this world at the time. And I think that that still rings true.

00:25:05 And people... It's not unusual that I'm in a foreign country, where people are getting to know me, and at some point, someone will say, "Were you in New York during September 11?" And want to hear my story or a part of it. Now, do I see many people who have taken my lesson or heard them? I wouldn't have spoken tonight the way I did if I thought I had.

00:25:31 Um, I, I think people are forgetting that incredible coming-together that we had. Because it was amazing in a way that most people forget sometimes. We sort of remember the sadness, but we forget that special time when we really... didn't see color, didn't see gender, didn't see ethnicity, didn't see religion. We just saw people who died. And we saw the sorrow of their family members. And that to me is a moment that I want to continue to spread the message about.

00:26:23 Clifford Chanin: Thank you. I want to shift a little bit, because I'm going to refer to something you write about...

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: There was a young man who, one of the ambassadors...

Clifford Chanin (laughing): That's, that's not me, I can tell you that.

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor (laughing): No... I didn't mean that.

(laughter)

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: Who said he had a question about my September 11 experience. Did I answer, did I answer your question?

(audience member responds)

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: All right. If you, if I didn't, you can... At the other time, well, just raise your hand and ask it, okay?

Clifford Chanin: He's, he's teed up to start, so we'll get his, we'll get his final judgment afterward. But in your book "My Beloved World," you write about your experience in the D.A.'s office, and the many things you saw, and the impact it had on you to prosecute some very difficult crimes, of course.

00:27:07

But I want to ask you about evil, because this is something that we saw here on 9/11 so clearly, exposed for the world to see, and you write about one of the cases that you handled, where there was an individual who committed such heinous crimes that in your mind, it seems it crossed a line into that world of evil, and you describe sort of the presence of the Devil in his actions. And I...

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: The Tarzan Murderer, yes.

00:27:34

Clifford Chanin: And I, I want to get you to reflect on evil itself and its relationship to law and criminality. And whether or not evil is a continuation, or, or a continuum of that, or is it a category apart that the law cannot reach?

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: It's a category apart. You know, I think that people feel that when someone commits a crime, that they're evil. But there is all sorts of gradations of crime.

00:28:12

When you speed, you don't think you're evil, do you? You don't think you're evil when you litter, right? I doubt you think you're evil when you took that quarter from the telephone booth.

(laughter)

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: You stole AT&T's quarter.

(laughter)

00:28:32

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: But it's, it's not even that. There are some crimes that are horrific, like murder, that are products of passion, of lost control moments, and the family who's suffering it may feel it was an evil act, but there is reason in many of those situations to understand or believe that the people who committed that act, it was an act beyond their normal life expectation, of something that they could be capable of.

00:29:10

And there are, whether people believe it or not, lots of crimes motivated by economics. Now, one can say, and I know many people do, that if you sell drugs, you're doing it for money, and that's not an economic crime, that's greed. And it can be. But the forces that drive people to that are varied and, and many. And just the way that you can tell children who do something wrong, "What you did I don't like, but I still love you."

00:29:49

If you're a judge or another human being, you can say, "I don't like what you did, but I think there's hope." And I think that in many ways-- and Geoff, I don't know if you agree or not-- that for the vast majority of criminals... a different life, a different path, a different lots of things, their

life would have been different. But I learned in the D.A.'s office, as I probably did on September 11, feel it again-- there is evil. In a very small portion of the world.

00:30:37

The trick for us as human beings is to understand that difference. Because we can't write off the majority of our criminal elements and believe there's no hope, because there still is. But there are people like the Tarzan Murderer and the individuals who committed that act, where inside of themselves, they stopped being human.

00:31:12

Because the moment you can't have empathy at all for your victims, you've lost humanity. And that's what terrorists do, lose that empathy. That's what criminals like the one I'm describing, who killed people blindly and without thought, destroyed families and shattered lives-- he was a man who just didn't care. That's evil. And so for me there's a big, big difference.

00:31:46

Clifford Chanin: Does that put those small numbers of cases that you referred to somehow beyond the reach of the law? You can incarcerate people for that, but there's no, I'm assuming, no way back for them?

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: There might not be for some people. Now, you're getting into a more philosophical question that I won't engage in with you, but I, I will discuss it, which is death penalty or not. The reality is, we haven't found a foolproof way of ensuring that we're inflicting the death penalty just on those evil people.

00:32:18

And, and perhaps if we could find a way to do that, there might be a better philosophical discussion about whether it's necessary. But there are other ways of incarcerating those people, and so that's a philosophical question that citizens ask themselves on multiple, multiple levels. But I think people forget that we're, that that issue of, "What's the punishment?", is very different from the recognition that there might be some people who are evil in the world.

00:32:51 Clifford Chanin: I want to switch a little bit. I've watched a number of your appearances at law schools and such, and I take away from that-- the way you speak about not just the Supreme Court, where you sit now, but your previous jurisdictions and courts-- I took away the impression of you as a real institutionalist, and you, in these appearances, make, it seems to me, a very strong effort to try to describe the court, the function of the court, and in some way defend it in a way that maybe deals with people's misunderstanding of it.

00:33:23 U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: You're very perceptive.

(laughter)

Clifford Chanin: Thank you.

(laughter)

Clifford Chanin: I take that as a ruling, by the way.

(laughter)

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: You know...

Clifford Chanin: It's now official, by the way, I want, I got witnesses, too. (laughing): I'm just, you know, but in, again, coming back to your book...

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor (laughing): Is your spouse here?

Clifford Chanin (laughing): I want it in writing, actually, but...

(laughter)

00:33:49 Clifford Chanin: But... uh, you, you... You describe your own background as such, as that is one that is, you know, quite distanced from some of these august institutions. And I'm interested in the connection between where you have come to and how you represent an institution and the trajectory in your life which left you feeling like an outsider along the path that you took, which nonetheless took you to these elite institutional places all along the way.

00:34:17 U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: It is quite a dichotomy, isn't it? I, I look at audiences of young people and I tell them, "I'm a very untraditional justice." And, and you know, I don't come from a similar background like most of my colleagues. Although I have a similar educational background, I don't have a similar either ethnic or, or life experience like most of them.

00:34:45 And I do think that coming from a different culture, not... and speaking a different language, that all of those things give you a worldview that is somewhat different than my colleagues', sometimes. As I tell people, all of my colleagues like the opera. I like jazz.

(laughter)

00:35:10 U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: All right? You know, they love French food, I like Creole food, you know? Um, there, there, there's a difference in us. So how does someone like me become an institutionalist? And it's some, because someone like me, in becoming a lawyer and a judge, truly believes in the fundamentals of our country. I believe in our Constitution. I believe that we as community need laws to help us live with one another. Now, that is a strange thing for me to say, but let's talk about some small examples, okay?

- 00:35:58 Why, when you get to that light on the corner, do you stop at red? Kids will say, "Because my parents told me to." And I'll look at them and say, "Who told your parents they had to do that?" Their parents, yes, but it's the law. And we have the green and red lights, and the penalties if you disobey those laws, because we as a community have decided that we will all give up a few minutes of our time every day in not getting to where we want to go to faster and without rules-- we'll slow ourselves down-- so as a community, we have a greater chance of reaching where we want to go safely, or more safely.
- 00:36:51 That's a law everybody likes, so that's a law everybody understands, okay? And there are many laws like that that we live under, laws in which we accommodate each other's needs, because we understand that they help us get along with one another in a better, community way. And then there are other laws where we're sharing resources, and those become the moments of contention.
- 00:37:22 Because our interests are very divided, the resources are limited, and some people get, and some people don't get, and the ones who don't get aren't happy, and the ones who do get may need more. So nobody's happy. And so we sit there thinking of law as bad, because we can't resolve those problems perfectly. But we don't have a perfect way to resolve our differences.
- 00:37:55 And I fundamentally believe that law is the way we do it, and that our Constitution gives us basic protections against the government's intrusions against our dignity and our freedom as individuals, because you have to retain some to feel like you're living. But you have to give up others to live in a community.
- 00:38:26 And so for me, even though I feel like I'm an outsider and I'm different, I understand the value of the structure. And I want to be a part of making it better. That's why I spend all of my time encouraging young people to be civically involved. And old people, too.

(laughter)

00:38:54 U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: This world does, a better world doesn't create itself. We have to be involved citizens, taking control of the things in the laws we don't like and moving to change them. We have to get involved in making a difference in the world we live in and in the situations we find ourselves. That generosity of September 11 is because there were people who were civically minded-- first responders, and police officers, and firefighters. It was their job, but it was their heart that led them into those places where they gave up their lives.

00:39:36 So we have to live that life as a community, and so for me, there is little tension in wanting to protect our Constitution. Wanting to impress upon people the importance of the Supreme Court as an institution, and your need to guard it, and to participate fully in trying to create this more perfect union. And so for me, yes, I'm a traditionalist. Very much so, but I'm also a little bit of a firebrand.

(laughter)

00:40:17 U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: And I'm willing to throw down the gauntlet and tell people, "Come join the fight," okay?

Clifford Chanin: I want to just play off that, I'll... One more, and we'll turn to our ambassadors. But again, returning to your book, and the way you describe yourself in relation to your accomplishments, and you acknowledge—very frankly, it seems to me-- that you have this feeling of insecurity at many steps along the way.

00:40:42 And I'm curious for our young people, and for our older people, you know, how did you forge ahead through that, even feeling these things as you were accomplishing so much? And is there a method that you have for doing that that we might all learn from?

00:41:00 U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: Well, I do, and often do say, that the greatest impediment to success in life is fear. To every child in every room, or young person in every room, how often did you tell your parents, "I don't want to taste that"? "I don't..." I did it. "I don't want to learn how to dance. I don't want to be embarrassed." It took me till I was 50...

(laughter)

00:41:29 U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: ...to get over that fear of being embarrassed. Um... we do it all the time, in tiny, little ways and in big ways. How many people, if someone says, "Apply for that job." And they say, "Oh, no, they won't pick me." Or, "Oh, no, that's too big for me." Or, "Oh, no, I just can't do that." We do it all the time. That's fear. Fear of embarrassing ourselves, fear of failure, fear of being shamed, or whatever it's fear about, it's fear.

00:42:08 And it stops us from growing and learning and trying new things. And I've recognized virtually my entire life that every time I have those moments, I have to stare the fear in the face. I have to look at it and admit it. And the second thing I have to do with it is, I have to verbalize it, first to myself, and then second to others.

00:42:41 And the thing you have to do when you pick others in your life is, you have to pick real friends. And that I tell young people all the time. You don't need people who'll say yes to you, "Don't do that." You need people who'll say, "Why are you being so silly?" And in every tough, insecure of my... moment of my life, I have had friends-- I have some of them in the first row right now-- who have done that for me. Who have looked at me and shaken me and said, "You can and will do this."

00:43:19 Because sometimes you can't do it yourself. You just need that helping hand to sort of look at you and remind you of what you're capable of. So I guess, yes, the method to my madness has always been to surround myself with mentors and friends who will support me in jumping over the mountain.

Clifford Chanin: Seems to have worked out.

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: It has. (laughter)

00:43:50 Clifford Chanin: Well, we're going to turn now-- and this was the justice's suggestions-- as Alice mentioned, we have this program of Museum Ambassadors. These are high school students who spend a year here, after school and on weekends, learning the story of 9/11, helping run our programs. And so we have asked them to prepare a question, and I will call on each one along the way.

00:44:13 We start first, and Harry, you may have already had your question answered, but Harry Dannatt is a junior at Léman Manhattan Prep, and he has the first question.

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: Hello! No, he wasn't... it was the young man next to him, but we'll get to you before I leave, how's that?

(laughter)

00:44:31 U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: Hello, Harry, I'm going to come down. I like walking, it helps me think. and it helps me get closer to you. But all those nice people with little things in their ears, they're here to protect me from me.

(laughter)

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: They don't like me walking around, but I'm going to do it anyway, okay? Where's the nice photographer who was with us? Is she still here?

Clifford Chanin: She is here.

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: All right, you can come take pictures with the kids when I'm talking to them, how's that? Go ahead, Harry.

00:45:00

Harry Dannatt: Following 9/11, have you noticed a change in New Yorkers' sense of community compared to when you lived here prior to the attacks?

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: You know, there was one enormous change that I think was very much a product of September 11. Before September 11, I would meet so many people across the country, and the world, who would talk about how disagreeable New Yorkers were.

(laughter)

00:45:30

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: How rude our taxicab drivers were, how nasty people were when you stopped them to ask them for directions, and things like that. And interestingly enough, post-September 11, I think it changed New Yorkers. You know, I walk the streets now, and I watch tourists stopping us, whether it's me or a lot of other people, and ask them for directions.

People actually stop and will look at the map and point to where they should go and what they should do. I do think the taxi and limousine service probably had something to do with our cab drivers being nicer.

(laughter)

00:46:10 U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: But there, there really has been a change. I, I believe that that, that September 11 feeling, that sense of us being community, actually stayed in those ways. And our pride in our differences. You know, there were so many people in that building of so many different backgrounds who died, and every day, we would see on the news where all those people were from, what families they left behind, why they were visiting or why they lived here, what they had escaped and what they were doing with their lives.

00:46:51 And I think that it, it did get under our skin in a very fundamental way. But yes, it is a small thing I saw, but I do think it has stayed. Thank you.

Clifford Chanin: Next up is John Spade, who is a senior at Staten Island Technical High School.

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: Hello.

John Spade: Hello. So, as one of the most influential leaders in the United States, in your personal opinion, what do you believe are the largest ramifications of 9/11 on both the national and then the global scale?

00:47:22 U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: Well, um... Look, terrorism is here to stay, no matter what we say or think. And whether Osama Bin Laden is alive or his particular sect of terrorism is still present or not, if it's not his, it's going to be someone else's. And it is someone else's. We live in a fractured world, in a world where resources are limited and can't and aren't freely shared. The reality is, there isn't enough resources to do for the world everything that the world needs.

00:48:07 And in that situation, I think that reality became so starkly vivid. We're not isolated anymore. I think that was the first time America had been attacked from the outside. We had a civil war-- we had a revolution and we had a civil war, but it was fought here. That's the first time that the outside came and dropped a bomb here.

00:48:38 And I think that that realization has changed the world, not just about America, but by how fragile we are as a world. You know, I listen to the news today, whether it is the situation with North Korea or some of the other regional wars that are going on. And the regional disputes that could tick off a world war quite easily.

00:49:07 We should be very aware of that, and very sensitive to the fact that our security as a world is fragile. And so for me, that still is what we will live with and continue to live with, for as long as I'm going to live, and I fear as long as you're going to live.

Clifford Chanin: Our next question is from Saifa Khan, a senior at the Young Women's Leadership School of Astoria in Queens.

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: Hello.

00:49:41 Saifa Khan: Hi. How did you navigate law school as a woman of color, and what was your most important takeaway?

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: You know, I... There's a lot of talk right now whether law school should be three years or two years. A very dear mentor of mine had the audacity to appear before law school professors and give a speech where he said... (clicks tongue): "We should cut it down to two years."

(laughter)

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: He didn't get a very warm reception, okay?

(laughter)

00:50:14 U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: But my takeaway of law school...

(laughter)

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: My takeaway of law school is, it's hard. It's not intended to be easy. It really isn't, it's an almost impossible way to try to explain to someone what thinking like a lawyer is. (chuckles) Because there is no easy way to explain how, as a lawyer, you look at a set of facts, and the first thing you do is organize them around a principle.

00:50:49 And that's what the law teaches you to do. It's a legal principle, but you're looking at a situation and trying to fit it around a legal precept, some legal box. And, or you're trying to take those facts and pull them apart and convince a judge that it doesn't belong in that box, it belongs in the one you're creating over here, okay?

00:51:15 But it is a way of thinking that's different than most people do naturally. It's particularly different for people who come from a different culture, because in all cultures, your way of talking, of describing, of arguing, of convincing, differs. Maybe it could be, what is it that... And I may be wrong about this, but I think it is the Japanese culture? You never say "no" to an invitation? All right? That I've been taught-- it's just bad manners. If you don't say "no" as a lawyer, you're in a lot of trouble, okay?

(laughter)

00:51:54 U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: So how their lawyers do it, I'm not quite sure, but they have to find a different method to communicate disagreement. Because it's culturally very, very different. To me, it was, law school was impossibly hard. And I'm very open about

saying that while in law school, I really didn't learn how to be a lawyer. It wasn't until I got to the D.A.'s office that I finally understood what being a lawyer was all about.

00:52:26 And I talk in my book about my failure at my first law firm job I had, and how inadequate I felt many of, much of my time in law school. But it is like everything else-- if you stick to it, and you keep trying to figure something out, it does come. You just can't be deterred from trying. And the most important thing is understanding that you're not stupid when you don't immediately understand something.

00:53:04 That you need to grow to understand, and that all of us are capable of growth if we give ourselves the chance to grow. And so for me, that's what's kept me going my entire life. You know, I've hit a lot of brick walls, and I tell people, "Sometimes you can knock them down, but sometimes you just have to go around them." And I often have gone around things. And then sometimes I've hit the brick wall, and I go, and I've worked at knocking it down.

00:53:39 So when I found out I couldn't write English, I went and bought grammar-school grammar books and vocabulary books. I read them from first grade to 12th grade over again, and I found a professor who worked with me to improve my writing. And at a more advanced age, I won first place in the "New York Times" Bestseller List.

(laughter and applause)

00:54:17 U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: That took nearly 50 years.

(laughter)

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: More actually-- hello.

Clifford Chanin: Next up is Henry Valencia, who is a senior at White Plains High School.

Henry Valencia: Hello.

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: Hello.

Henry Valencia: And my question is, in your opinion, what is, what is the impact of increased representation of Hispanics in the government?

(Sotomayor sighs)

(laughter)

00:54:42

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: I had the great privilege and honor last night to have my portrait unveiled at the Association of the Bar of the City of New York.

(applause)

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: As improbable as becoming a Supreme Court justice was for me as a Hispanic, the idea that a portrait of me would be put up in a place like the city bar... that's, that's a dream.

(laughter)

00:55:20

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: That's not even, that's not within the realm of reality, okay? And what two of the young speakers at the presentation said, and I've grown to understand it's true. Both of

them said-- they were both Latina women-- and both of them said, "It makes a difference to see someone like you up in a place like this."

00:55:52 And when you walk into a cross, courtroom, you're not going to see neither Latinos or blacks or whites, or Indians or any Chinese or Japanese in every courtroom. But if you walk into a building, and there is no one who looks like you, you'll never feel like you belong. And so I do think it's important, that diversity in everything we do in our society is important.

00:56:25 Because people, whether it's Hispanic or of a different background, have to know it's possible. And so that is what it means. It means that we as children can look up and imagine ourselves as adults. And if you can see that, then you can see all possibilities.

00:56:55 I don't know if you remember, there's an iconic picture of President Obama with a young child, an African-American boy. And the president was bending down, and the boy was touching his hair.

(laughter)

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: You know, when that, our president was elected, every child of color knew there was a possibility. So I hope, if you see me in my courtroom, you'll have the same hope.

(applause)

00:57:40 Clifford Chanin: William Kim is a junior at Regis High School in Edgewater, New Jersey.

William Kim: Hello. As someone who is interested in government, what advice would you give on how to keep your mind on the big picture and to not be clouded by your own opinions and views?

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: How a, what a fascinating question.

(laughter)

00:58:06 U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: You know, because I think that we all sort of get driven to things by our own opinions and views. That's what motivates us generally to act. How we stay above that is really a personal choice of how open a human being you want to perceive yourself to be. Because no one can force you to be open. That's self-selection.

00:58:37 You have to choose to want to hear others. You have to choose to think, "I could be wrong." You know, I was recently with a group of judges, and one of them asked me, "What advice would you give a beginning judge?" And I stopped for a second, and I said, "Admit you can make a mistake." And a number of them came up to me later and said, "No one's ever said that to us." And I said, "That's true."

(laughter)

00:59:09 U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: There's this fight if you're a judge never to admit you make a mistake. A, you don't want to appear weak to the lawyers, okay? But B, sometimes if you make a mistake and you try to fix it in the courtroom, you've opened up a can of worms, okay? Having done it a couple of times, it's hard. But that willingness to admit you're human, that I think is the greatest strength that any person can have.

00:59:41 Because if you can admit that, then you can stay open to listening to other people's views. And that is what always keeps me trying to listen, because I know I can be wrong. And so whether it's in government or anything else you do, understand that we only know as much as the

world we know. You know, the limits of our growth are what we have before us. The possibilities are beyond us unless we let others take us there.

01:00:25

And so I welcome you to become involved. I welcome you to have passions, and even when you do, to remember you could be wrong.

(laughter and applause)

Clifford Chanin: Patrick Baumann is a senior at Fordham Prep in Manhattan.

Patrick Baumann: Why is it important that 9/11 continues to be taught in school?

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: Hmm, what a fascinating question. You're better able to answer that than me.

(laughter)

01:01:03

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: No, but I do think... Is it, is it September 11, or is it the lessons from it that are being taught? I hope it's the lessons. Because if it's just the events that happened, then it becomes like World War I or World War II, okay? How many movies have we seen about that? Maybe you less in recent times, but when I was growing up, all those movies about all those wars.

01:01:34

And even despite seeing all the movies, I'm not sure it really penetrated into my reality. And I, that's what I fear with September 11. If they teach it that way, like they've taught movies and past history, that people will not find it important. But I do think that if we talk about it as experience, and what people learned from it, and how it changed the world, and

what lessons, positive, we can take from it. That it's a lesson worth remembering.

01:02:13

And so it's still alive because... You're only about, what, what? Maybe you're a third of the population that hasn't experienced September 11? There are still two-thirds that has-- the middle-aged and the older? But the point is that that's why I think it's important. Because it did change the world. And all of you should understand why. But also understand how you could change it for the better. So good luck in doing that.

(laughter and applause)

01:02:51

Clifford Chanin: Stephanie Sarpong, a sophomore at the Success Academy High School in Manhattan.

Stephanie Sarpong: As, as we leave this job and space, what can we, what can or should we do as ambassadors to keep the conversation going?

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: Ah! Well, I told you when I saw you all earlier that I thought you would be ambassadors from this museum to the world. I expect and I hope that you'll never forget this experience. A year of immersing yourselves in this situation will give you a perspective that most people don't have.

01:03:33

It's my hope, and I think probably the museum's hope, that you will bring family and friends for the rest of your life. That you will introduce new people to the experience of September 11 in the way that you've had it, in the sort of personal understanding of the people and its impact.

01:03:54

And so for me, how do we hope? That's the one word we haven't talked about tonight. It's the one thing that this museum can't do, can it? It can't tell you what we have to do as a world to try to face and deal with the issues that caused September 11. But if we stop talking about that? And

trying to imagine solutions? Then we are going to lose hope. Because it won't happen.

01:04:31 And ambassadorship starts and continues in large measure in trying to get the rest of the world to understand that we care about them, too. And so for me, that's how you remain an ambassador. Not just about them, but about them and us. So good luck in doing that.

(laughter)

01:05:01 Clifford Chanin: Before we take our last question, I would just like the audience to acknowledge and thank our ambassadors for their wonderful questions.

(applause)

Clifford Chanin: I have one more here and then...

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: Ah, okay.

Clifford Chanin: So our next question is from Milo Amonte from, a senior from the High School for Health Professions and Human Services in Brooklyn.

Milo Amonte: Oh, hi.

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: Hi.

01:05:27 Milo Amonte: Do you have any words of advice for any young adults attempting to reach their dream?

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: Ah! Don't give up!

(laughter and applause)

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: You think that's a silly bit of advice. It's not. You know what happens in life? It gets harder.

(laughter)

01:05:47

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: Nothing about it gets easier. High school is tough? Wait till you get to college.

(laughter)

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: Studying gets even harder, okay? You go to law school, it's even harder, another step harder. You go to work, nothing's easy, okay?

(laughter)

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: I make it sound awful, don't I?

(laughter)

01:06:05

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: But it's not, because everything's a new challenge. And everything is a new opportunity to grow and to learn more, to be better at what you're doing. And if you look at life that way, which is, "Okay, I messed that up. What did I learn?"

Okay? Because every time you mess something up, you should learn something about yourself. "Where was I weak? Where did I not try enough? Where didn't I spend enough time studying? What was it that made this a failure? What can I change to avoid it the next time?" And most importantly, "Will I change it?"

01:06:47 And so all of life's failures can come up with wonderful lessons about how to be better and how to do things better. And so for me, my advice is, don't give up learning. Every single day, try to figure out, "What can I do better? How can I improve? What is it that I should change in my dream?"

01:07:15 Because, you know, when I went to law school, I wasn't quite sure what I was going to do. And at first, I thought I would do international law, believe it or not. That's what I studied. And as I got to my senior year, I realized, "Eh, maybe I've made a mistake."

(laughter)

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: And I happened to go to a meeting and meet Bob Morgenthau, the legendary district attorney of New York. And I heard him speak. I met him at the food line, which is what, what attracted me to the talk, by the way.

(laughter)

01:07:58 U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: And he told me to come visit him, and I did. And I changed the whole path of my career on that one meeting. Now, I didn't think it was going to lead me here. It ultimately did. But the point is, sometimes you have to sort of, you have to plan everything, but you have to be ready at the right moment to say, "I'm going to change the game plan. I'm going to try this."

01:08:30 So be a planner, but be flexible. Be open, be open always to the new. But don't let yourself drift. Have a plan. So that fine balance, always? Good luck to you.

(applause)

Ralph Lamberti: I'm Ralph Lamberti, I also go to Regis High School. I also wasn't planning on asking this, because you sort of covered it, but how exactly can we achieve that sense of unity that we had as New Yorkers right after 9/11 today?

01:09:13 U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: That's the hard part. And that's the part that I want to talk about, or was trying to talk about, because I don't have an answer to that. I don't, I don't know. I just know we had it, and I think we have to keep reminding ourselves of it. We have to keep sort of thinking about, what was it about that day that made us capable of forgetting and looking past our differences and finding our commonality?

01:09:41 And so, when tragedies strike in the city, we have to go back to saying, "Why don't I feel the same way about what I see happening in the Bronx or Brooklyn or Staten Island or in my other neighborhood? Why aren't I reacting the same way I did that day?" When you are in a street, and you hear someone crying in pain, are you walking away or you walking towards?

01:10:08 And every step you take away, you should be stopping and saying to yourself, "Why? Why am I disinterested?" I walked down Sixth Avenue and held total strangers who were crying. And I reached out-- I happened to know what they were crying about, but not really. I didn't know if they were just emotional hearing about all the deaths, or there was someone in one of the buildings that they knew and loved. But I just reached out, because I understood they needed someone to hold them.

01:10:45

But how often do we walk past people in distress, and we don't stop? And so that's what I'm trying to get people to come back to, which is checking their moments every moment, their reactions and their lack of reactions, and questioning the why and trying to change their behavior, so that we emulate the heroism that we were capable of showing. We can do it. We just have to find ways to take ourselves back there, as often as we can find them.

(applause)

01:11:30

Clifford Chanin: I'm going, I'm going to ask that the audience stay seated while Justice Sotomayor leaves, and when you do get up to exit, please exit through the rear. And that allows me then to set up, for all of us, our great thanks to Justice Sonia Sotomayor to come here to the museum, thank you.

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: Thank you.

(applause)