RBG and Years of Connections
With Richardson Law School

The William S. Richardson School of Law feels closely connected to Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the legendary U.S. Supreme Court Justice who passed away on Friday, September 18, at the age of 87. Justice Ginsburg enjoyed three extended visits to the University of Hawai‘i Law School where she taught classes and met with students and faculty members as well as members of the community in many varied settings.

During her last Jurist-in-Residence visit in February 2017 as part of the program sponsored by the Case Lombardi & Pettit law firm, law students honored her with hula, and helped her plant a Native Hawaiian ‘ohia lehua tree in the courtyard in her honor. In addition to teaching, she answered questions as she addressed a large outdoor Law School gathering and she also met with 200 students from 10 O‘ahu high schools during a pouring rainstorm, which prevented her from her scheduled horseback riding outing. Known for being indefatigable, she had done just that during an earlier visit in 2004, on the same day that she paddled and swam with law students in the morning, tended to Court business, and then attended an opera that evening.

On each visit, in fact, she was extraordinarily generous with her time. In her 2017 visit, for example, she made space in her hectic, five-day schedule to meet with student journalists from the University of Hawai‘i student newspaper, to have lunches with the Law School faculty and with the justices of the Hawai‘i Supreme Court at the back of their beautiful courtroom. She also attended several dinners in her honor, visited with women law students, and had brunch with members of the Hawai‘i Women’s Legal Foundation.

“There is no better time to be going into the legal profession,” she told women students. “There are no closed doors to you.” She further advised all law students “to do something outside yourself that you feel passionate about.” The way to affect change, she told them, is to “affiliate with like-minded people … (and) join forces with others who are passionate about what you care about. There’s not much you can do as a loner.”
Early in her career, Ginsburg affiliated with the American Civil Liberties Union which, by the late 1960s, had grown to be the country’s leading civil liberties organization. It became the base as a young attorney, and as a law professor, from which she successfully litigated pathbreaking U.S. Supreme Court decisions that changed the law to protect equal rights from gender discrimination.

During Ginsburg’s February 2017 visit, Associate Dean of Student Services Ronette Kawakami ’85 sewed and presented a gift for the Justice - a lace jabot with 49 rare tiny pink *kahelelani* Ni‘ihau shells. And in the hit documentary ‘RBG’, during a scene in Ginsburg’s Supreme Court chambers, she pulled down a box and displayed the elaborate collar; explaining to the film’s co-director Betsy West: “This one was given to me by the University of Hawai‘i. And she made it with French lace, and the beads are from the beach.”

As Justice Ginsburg planted a tree in the Richardson courtyard, law students explained the tree’s significance and the importance of the *kalo* that students have also planted in the courtyard.

“The *kalo* stands for social justice for the Native Hawaiians,” said Marcos Bendana ’18. “You are like the *kalo*, standing for social justice.”

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Reflections and memories of RBG from members of the Richardson faculty:

**The unflappable RBG**

- Professor John Barkai

Our family’s favorite RBG story springs from one of her early visits to Hawai‘i. The faculty held a luncheon in her honor at the Waioli Tea Room. As the lunch concluded, the Dean suggested that I drive her and her husband back to their hotel. In those days, the justices traveled without security details.
The Dean obviously forgot what car I owned, but I was not about to turn down the opportunity to be a chauffeur and tour guide for a U.S. Supreme Court Justice.

As Justice Ginsburg climbed into the passenger seat of my old, funky two-door 1985 Datsun and her tall husband, Professor Marty Ginsburg, squeezed through the passenger door to sit sideways on the tiny backseat, RBG did not bat an eye or make any comment.

However, they probably both wondered how much the faculty at our Law School did get paid. Because Justice Ginsburg returned to our Law School several more times she obviously was not offended and perhaps was even amused by her ride - but it never showed. She must have had much bigger things on her mind than my car.

My wife and I still laugh about the car story whenever we think about RBG and know that Justice Ginsburg was, as they say - truly unflappable.

**A Lifetime Memory for a Student**

- **Professor Frances H. Miller**

This photo from RBG’s last visit to Richardson is of my 3L student Lori McManus with the Justice. Lori and I had been watching RBG speak from the Law School’s second floor balcony during her 2017 visit, and when she ended her remarks and people were lining up to shake her hand, I said, “Come on, Lori, you need to shake her hand.”

Lori was very shy and resisted, saying, “I wouldn’t know what to say to her.” I told her, “Just say thank you. You’ll regret it for the rest of your life if you don’t pay your respects.” (I gave Lori a framed copy of this photo for her graduation.) Just look at the warmth of the Justice’s smile for an anonymous student.

**Lovely moments with RBG on her visit in 2017**

- **Ronette M. Kawakami, Associate Dean for Student Services**

On the first day at the Law School, after her talk in the Courtyard, she was in the
Dean’s Conference room that had been rearranged as an office for her. Everyone’s phones started blowing up because the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals decision on Hawai‘i v Trump had been decided. Avi was telling her the result and there was a big smile on her face. I was skimming the decision on my phone, and was about to say: “Give me your number and I will text you the decision,” and then suddenly realized ‘Why would a Supreme Court Justice give me her phone number?’ So I had my administrative assistant print the decision. I stuck my head into the room and said, ‘We’re printing a hard copy of the decision right now,’ and she turned, looked right at me with a calm intensity and said, “Good.”

We watched her read the decision with that same laser focus for the next 20 minutes. It was an electric moment, like being a part of history.

As a part of the visit, my intent was to have our students be as close to her as possible; as a result I had 16 students appointed to be her assistants at each event, with two students per event. They carried a cooler bag with water, fizzy water, a snack, hot black coffee, a first aid kit, and tissues. On the second day, in the afternoon, together with the HSBA, RBG spoke to the Bar members in the Supreme Court. She had had an exhausting day, and sat in a comfortable chair where she could greet all the well-wishers. I asked her what she would like to drink, and the answer was some white wine. Well it was a public courthouse and we couldn’t have alcohol there. I explained, but felt so badly. She still had a dinner planned for that evening, and I told her that they would definitely have wine there. But for the rest of the trip, I made sure there was a small chilled bottle of wine in the cooler bag.

While we fusséd over her, RBG was actually a low-maintenance person. She was gracious, shy, and soft-spoken. Being the Notorious One, and an opera aficionado did not mean she was a diva; in fact, it was just the opposite. She almost never asked for anything, was always smiling, and just pleased to be wherever we were in the moment. She was always exquisitely dressed, her skin was luminous, and I especially loved her carved green jade earrings.

Memories through many years
- Former Law Dean Avi Soifer
My first dealings with Justice Ginsburg were in 1979 when she was a law professor and already somewhat legendary as a litigator against gender discrimination for the ACLU. That summer I had volunteered to work in the national office of the ACLU, with a primary focus on an important First Amendment case.

Professor Ruth Bader Ginsburg and I disagreed on some doctrinal issues, and I have completely forgotten the specifics. My clear recollection is that she took a more pragmatic approach than I argued for as a brash young law professor. In retrospect, this was but one example of her remarkable ability to “see around legal corners,” which was a key element as she had carefully built a litigation strategy in gender cases she won in the U.S. Supreme Court through the 1970s.

Despite having a number of friends in common, my next direct dealing with Justice Ginsburg was a few years after she was on that Court. As the dean of the Boston College Law School, I had the privilege of hosting a Supreme Court swearing-in event for our alumni every spring, timed to try to coincide with the arrival of the cherry blossoms. The tradition included asking a Justice to meet with our alumni group after my motion for their admission had been granted. In my last year as dean, I asked Justice Ginsburg to be that Justice, largely because I was anxious to have my daughter, Amira, then aged 12, meet her. With what truly was characteristic grace, Justice Ginsburg agreed, and told me to bring Amira to her chambers where she was meeting a group of women lawyers, after which Justice Ginsburg said she would bring Amira to the room where our alumni and their families were gathered.

A particularly vivid memory was the scene of the two of them walking together down a long, empty Supreme Court building hallway: Justice Ginsburg, who was under 5 feet tall, and Amira, who was already over 6 feet tall. Justice Ginsburg, though genuinely quite shy, nonetheless was extremely generous in meeting and talking and posing for pictures. The following day - without parental suggestion, as I recall - Amira sent a thank you note and apologized for being somewhat difficult to talk with because she was shy and said she was often more comfortable in writing. Remarkably, but with her characteristic grace, Justice Ginsburg took the time to write back almost immediately, and she told Amira that she had been that way, too.

As the new dean at the William S. Richardson School of Law a year later in 2003-04, I had the great good fortune to learn that my predecessor, Larry Foster, had arranged for Justice Ginsburg to be the Jurist-in-Residence that spring. It was her second visit to the Law School, and it was clear that she blossomed in Hawai‘i and was less reserved than usual. With her wonderfully warm and outgoing husband, Marty, this visit may have been a part of the celebration of her 70th birthday, and they brought along and allowed us to show a loving, funny video tribute to her made by her law clerks.
There were countless memorable moments during that visit and during her final visit in 2017, when she already had become the iconic “Notorious RBG.” Though I certainly would like to go on with my memories during this extremely sad period as we begin to try to come to terms with losing such a tireless and innovative major force as a lawyer, as a judge, and as an inspiration, I will limit myself to the sparkling day on which this picture was taken in 2004:

It took a great deal of negotiation, but the U.S. Marshals charged with protecting Justice Ginsburg finally agreed that she could go paddling with a group of our students that morning.

Judge Mike Town had arranged the entire expedition but, once we were out beyond the reef, Justice Ginsburg asked if it would be OK to swim. Soon, reluctant marshals notwithstanding, most of us were in the water and Justice Ginsburg seemed delighted. (Long before she was famous for her workouts as part of her battle against multiple cancers, Ruth “Kiki” Bader had been a high school champion baton twirler and she remained extraordinary for her energy and focus throughout her life.)

Once we paddled to shore, Justice Ginsburg excused herself and asked us to wait for her as she took a phone call at some distance down the beach. She then returned and chatted with all the students and posed patiently for every last picture, including this group photo. Later, I learned that the call involved a death penalty case. I also found out that after a quick lunch, Justice Ginsburg went horseback riding that afternoon and to the opera that evening.

There are innumerable additional stories - not least the encounter by that day’s riding party, which included not only the U.S. marshals but also state judges, with a group of state prisoners using machetes to clear brush from the trail. That meeting passed without incident, but so many of the meetings we enjoyed with Justice Ginsburg at the Law School and throughout the community are now recalled with poignancy, but also with great fondness and awareness that we had the exceptional good fortune to encounter a courageous, diminutive woman who was a giant in the law.