



Supreme Court Justices Thomas '74, Alito '75, and Sotomayor '79 Receive Award of Merit

Photos by Harold Shapiro



United States Supreme Court Justices Clarence Thomas '74, Samuel A. Alito, Jr. '75, and Sonia Sotomayor '79 sat before a crowd of people on October 25, discussing their views and thoughts on the law. On this occasion, however, the Justices were not behind a bench, in robes, listening to legal argument. Instead, the three Justices sat before a crowd of former classmates and other alumni as they received the Yale Law School Association's Award of Merit for their contributions to the legal profession. The ceremony was the centerpiece of the 2014 Alumni Weekend, which examined the theme of "Judging."

During his introductory remarks, Dean Robert C. Post '77 lauded the Justices for their extraordinary contributions to the substance of American Law.

"The tale of each of these Justices is a quintessentially American story, a story of upward mobility; of hard, relentless work; of staggering achievement; and of great inborn talent," said Post. "In different ways, and in the name of different ideals, each of our honorees has already left an indelible mark on the shape of our common jurisprudence."

The Justices were candid, humorous, and thoughtful during the ninety-minute discussion moderated by Lafayette S. Foster Professor of Law Kate Stith. They discussed their lives on and off the bench, including their time at Yale, their passions in life, and their feelings about one another.

"I got to Yale, and I learned a deep sense of humility because sitting next to my classmates, listening to them, taught me how much smarter so many other people were and how smart has different faces," recalled Sotomayor.

"When I left Yale, I had a sense of how bright or how much others knew and how much I needed to learn to be where they were," said Thomas. "And that would take years."

Justice Alito reminisced about his time on Moot Court, and how he still marvels that he made it through one final round despite his blunt interaction with a Judge on the case.

“He kept hammering me with one particular question,” said Alito. “And then I said I would like to move on to my other argument. He said you haven’t answered my question to my satisfaction yet. And my response was, well, I’ve answered it to my satisfaction,” said Alito as the crowd laughed. “This was an incredibly open-minded person who let me move on to the next round after that.”

The Justices also talked about their personal sides, like their passions for sports, traveling, and salsa dancing.

“I can’t keep a beat to save my life,” said Sotomayor, talking about how for fifty years she always sat by and watched others dance the salsa. “And I finally decided, you know this is something that I just want to change. So I took lessons. And I found out that I totally cannot keep a beat to save my life. It doesn’t matter what I do, I can’t keep a beat, but I have a facility that some of my colleagues would find very strange... I can follow.”

“It’s a revelation to know that Sonia likes to follow,” quipped Alito, as he sat next to her, smiling. “I think we are going to start dancing in the conference room.”

Clarence Thomas told the crowd about the motor coach that he and his wife have driven across the country.

“We’ve been doing it for fifteen years. We’ve been through Connecticut, Massachusetts, other parts of New England, Upstate New York, and the West and South, and it is an amazingly beautiful country,” said Thomas.

He also described a time right after *Bush v. Gore* when he was driving the motor coach down to Florida and re-fueling at a truck stop. “You all probably don’t recall that case,” Thomas said as the audience laughed.

“I’m refueling—which is an interesting experience—with all the 18 wheelers, and one of the truckers walks by and says to me, did anybody ever tell you, you look like Clarence Thomas. I said, oh yeah. He said, I bet that happens all the time, doesn’t it?”

The Justices also talked about each other, and the deep sense of respect each Justice has for the other members serving on the court, no matter how deep their disagreements run.

“Sonia is very independent; she is very thorough in her preparation, not only on the merits of cases, but on the hundreds of cert petitions that we discuss,” said Alito. “She is very strong in her views and she doesn’t give up on the rest of us even when she sees the majority is going off in the wrong direction. She has hope that she can convince us, and she makes good arguments and sometimes she succeeds.”

“Goodness, she never gives up,” said Thomas, with a laugh.

“Sam is really smart, really funny, very principled, and a man of his word,” said Thomas, speaking about Justice Alito. “I tell my law clerks often that reputation is hard to build and easy to lose, and I think with us, Sam has a wonderful reputation of integrity and honesty and he’s really a funny guy.”

“Clarence knows the name of every employee in the courthouse from the lowest position to the highest, and with virtually all of them, he knows their families, their happiness, and their tragedies,” said Sotomayor. “We may disagree on a lot of legal issues, but we don’t disagree on the fundamental value of people, and you can respect someone whom you disagree with legally if you start with that foundation in principle.” Y



Watch the ceremony online:
www.law.yale.edu/videos

The Award of Merit

Since 1957, the Yale Law School Association, the alumni organization of Yale Law School, has presented the Award of Merit annually to an esteemed graduate of Yale Law

School or to a person who has served as a full-time member of the Yale Law School faculty for at least ten years. The recipients of the Award are recognized for having made a substantial contribution to public service or to the legal profession. Previous recipients of the award include: Eugene V.

Rostow '37 (1965), Cyrus R. Vance '42 (1971), Gerald R. Ford '41 (1979), Eleanor Holmes Norton '64 (1980), Ellen Ash Peters '54 (1983), William J. Clinton '73 (1993), and Hillary Rodham Clinton '73 (2013).

The Award itself was redesigned in 1998. It is a stained glass medallion resting in an oak base with a brass plaque inscribed to the recipient. The medallion depicts a traditional seated image of Justice holding scales in one hand and a sword in the other. It was executed by Enchanted Glassworks of Beacon Falls, Connecticut.

The medallion design is based on one of the many stained glass windows found within Yale's Sterling Law Buildings. The inspiration for that window, designed by Henderson Brothers of New York City during the original construction of the buildings in 1929–1931, was an image found on the reverse side of a Medieval playing card, copied from an illustration in *Les Cartes a Jouer*, a book depicting the history of playing cards from the fourteenth to the twentieth centuries.



1991
Associate Justice
of the Supreme Court

2006
Associate Justice
of the Supreme Court

2009
Associate Justice
of the Supreme Court

1990
Judge of the United States
Court of Appeals for the
District of Columbia Circuit

1990
United States Court of
Appeals for the Third Circuit

1998–2009
United States Court of
Appeals for the Second Circuit

1982–1990
Chairman of
the U.S. Equal Employment
Opportunity Commission

1987–1990
U.S. Attorney, District of
New Jersey

1992–1998
U.S. District Court,
Southern District of New York

1981–1982
Assistant Secretary
for Civil Rights,
U.S. Department of Education

1985–1987
Deputy Assistant Attorney
General, U.S. Department
of Justice

1979–1981
Legislative Assistant to
Senator John Danforth '63

1981–1985
Assistant to the Solicitor
General, U.S. Department
of Justice

1984–1992
Associate and partner at
Pavia & Harcourt
in New York City

1977–1979
Attorney with
the Monsanto Company

1977–1981
Assistant U.S. Attorney,
District of New Jersey

1974–1977
Assistant Attorney General
of Missouri

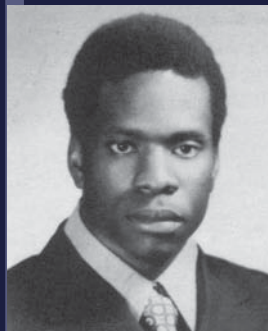
1976–1977
Law clerk for Leonard I. Garth
of the United States Court of
Appeals for the Third Circuit

1979–1984
Assistant District Attorney in
the New York County District
Attorney's Office

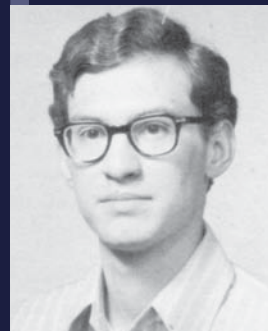
1974
Graduated from Yale Law School

1975
Graduated from Yale Law School

1979
Graduated from Yale Law School



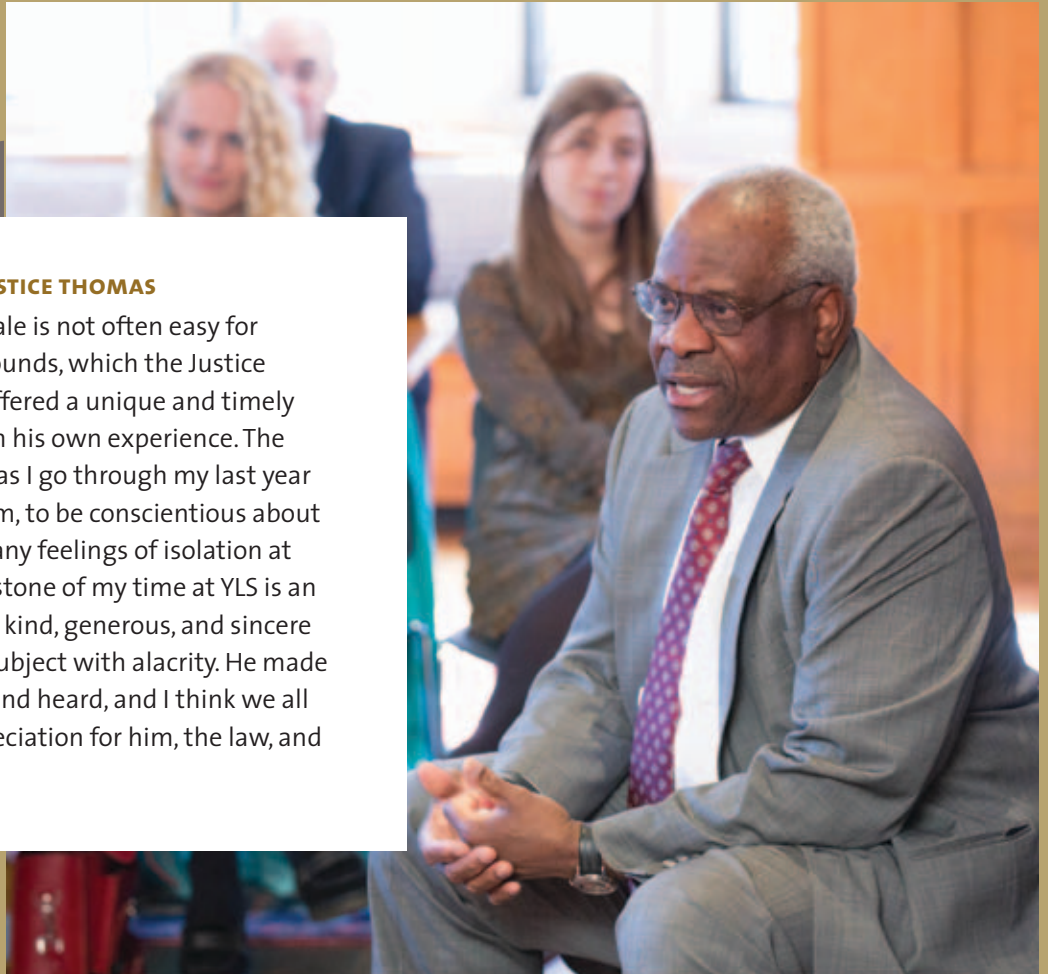
CLARENCE THOMAS
Born in Georgia, in 1948



SAMUEL ANTHONY ALITO, JR.
Born in New Jersey, in 1950



SONIA SOTOMAYOR
Born in New York, in 1954



NATALIE HAUSKNECHT '15 ON JUSTICE THOMAS

Adjusting to life in the halls of Yale is not often easy for students from non-elite backgrounds, which the Justice himself knows all too well. He offered a unique and timely message, which was drawn from his own experience. The message really encouraged me, as I go through my last year and think about life as a YLS alum, to be conscientious about how I can positively respond to any feelings of isolation at the school. To say it was the capstone of my time at YLS is an understatement. The Justice is a kind, generous, and sincere man, who can engage a tough subject with alacrity. He made everyone in the room feel seen and heard, and I think we all walked away with a better appreciation for him, the law, and our experience at YLS.



MANUEL A. CASAS MARTINEZ '15 LL.M. ON JUSTICE ALITO

As an international student, what I found most interesting about Justice Alito's talk were the personal stories about his time as a judge. He told us, for example, that the most junior Justice of the Supreme Court is in charge of opening the door during the Justice's conference. During his first conference, there came a knock on the door and Justice Breyer, who had been in charge of that for many years, darted to his feet to go open the door, prompting the Chief Justice to say: "Don't worry, Steve, that's not your job anymore." Those anecdotes, concerning apparently mundane aspects but which allow us to see the Court's respect for tradition—and apparently arcane rules—are very enriching.

**WILLIAM STONE '17 ON JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR**

Justice Sotomayor's sense of humility was refreshing. Reflecting at length on her approach to writing and to crafting legal arguments, Justice Sotomayor said that she writes to convince her mother. She explained that doing so helps her keep in mind the human element of what she does, to remember that she has a duty to educate the public. Her words convinced me that my background in education will be of use in a variety of ways beyond the classroom.

