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'RBG' film shows decades of hustle behind the justice we know

Before she was a cultural icon, Ginsburg's brilliance showed in her early ACLU cases

The documentary "RBG," by filmmakers Julie Cohen and Betsy West, is a cinematic coming-out party for the Brooklyn-born, bantamweight Supreme Court justice, Ruth Bader Ginsburg — known by masses of adoring millennials as the Notorious R.B.G. The nickname is a play on the nom de rap of the corpulent "gangster" rapper, the late Notorious B.I.G., who was revered for the speed and ferocity of his rhymes; and is the title of a 2015 blog-inspired book about Ginsburg's life.

"RBG" is more than a melange of home movies starring a beloved matriarch. It is a tribute to the pleasure of ideas, the world of words and the law. And it is a reminder that nothing about the women's movement was easy or foreordained.

As entertainment, "RBG" is similar to the biographical profiles in the PBS series "American Masters." Until now, we knew little about the soft-spoken Ginsburg's life beyond her progressive legal stance and her affection for her late colleague and opera buddy, Antonin Scalia.

The film fills in the personal gaps with a story that movingly documents the staggering challenges she endured, the great mutual devotion she shared with Martin Ginsburg, her husband of 56 years, and her unlikely status as a pop culture icon.

It is charming to witness the following she has garnered among young women, who adorn

her portrait with Basquiat-style crowns, compile quotations from her speeches into books ("You Can't Spell Truth Without Ruth") and even brand their bodies with tattoos of her image. (Ginsburg disapproves.)

Such veneration is bolstered by digital technology that has spawned a carnival of YouTube memes, "SNL" skits and improvised songs that play on the contrast between her "gangster" intellect and her barely 5-foot-tall physique.

The film takes us into her closet, where she has an Imelda Marcos-worthy collection of jabots — the decorative collars worn over her robes — and she explains that the darkest, spikiest, sparkling jabot is reserved for reading dissents from the bench. She has a bright, cheerful one for majority opinions.

Several times a week, she works out with a Special Forces Army Reservist trainer, a practice she began in 1999 to build strength after her second bout with cancer.

She bravely agreed to be filmed in the Supreme Court gym, revealing such a challenging regimen filled with planks and pushups — no knees — that it would flatten mere mortals.

Growing up in Brooklyn during the height of McCarthyism and the Red Scare, Ginsburg thought she could "do something about it" if she were a lawyer. She attended Cornell as an undergraduate, where she met the big-hearted life of the party, Marty Ginsburg.



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She describes him as the most wonderful thing that ever happened to her. After they married, both Ruth and Marty attended Harvard Law School, where Ruth, a year behind Marty, made law review.

When Marty, who was to become a prominent New York tax attorney, joined Weil Gotshal & Manges LLP, Ruth transferred to Columbia Law School where she graduated in 1959, first in her class.

Notwithstanding her stellar scholastic history, no law firm would hire her upon graduation. So she taught at Rutgers Law School and volunteered at the ACLU, where she was one of the founders of the New York-based Women's Rights Project. In this capacity, she argued six cases before the U.S. Supreme Court, winning five.

Her strategy was to select matters that were calculated to make good law by demonstrating that men and women both suffered from inequality.

As a lawyer, Ginsburg says she had to educate the court. Viewing the nine justices as a captive audience, she likens the experience to being a kindergarten teacher:

"I had to convince men who did not believe there was sex discrimination by telling them something they'd never heard before. The men on the bench

simply did not realize that sex discrimination existed."

Throughout her life, Joan Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the Notorious R.B.G., has embodied the virtues of each of her namesakes. She is the long-suffering Ruth whose mother died when she was 17 and the brilliant and loving wife who cared for their infant daughter. She collected notes from her husband's Harvard Law classmates and typed his papers while he received radiation treatment for cancer as a 3L. (She says the experience helped her to become an organized person).

At the Women's Equality Project, like Joan of Arc, Ginsburg was a crusader who astonished her male opponents with a surprising number of victories. And like fellow Brooklynite Notorious B.I.G., who used language with unequaled fluency, her size was no reason to underestimate her talent.

If Gloria Steinem is the Martin Luther King of the women's movement, then Ruth Bader Ginsburg is its Thurgood Marshall, the legal arm. Even without her high court seat, Ginsburg would have a place in history based on the landmark equal rights cases she argued before the Supreme Court — and won.

Most inspiring, though, is the "RBG" love story. Ginsburg says her husband was the first boy she ever met who cared that she had a brain. His pride in her was boundless and, by taking on household responsibilities (she was terrible cook anyway), he freed her up to change the world.

And when President Bill Clinton was considering candidates for the Supreme Court, gregarious Marty, well-known and well-liked in the legal, business and political circles of New York and Washington, lobbied to ensure his wife would be on the SCOTUS short list.

Within the first few minutes of her interview, President Clinton says, he knew he was going to appoint her — like Marty, like Scalia, like everyone else — he'd fallen in love with her mind.

Now that's gangster.