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# **RUTH'S IMPACT LIVES ON THROUGH THE TENACITY OF YOUNG PEOPLE**

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# RUTH'S IMPACT LIVES ON THROUGH THE TENACITY OF YOUNG PEOPLE

BY JULIA SQUITTERI AND JULIE WILSON

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## JULIA'S STORY OF FOUNDING THE RUTH PROJECT

When I was 16 years old, I walked into my high school and handed them a stack of legal arguments, citing testimonies by students—and arguing that my school was in violation of Title IX. I wanted to give them an argument they couldn't ignore, and it worked. Two years after that day, in the summer of 2022, Seminole County Public Schools, located in Orlando, Florida, changed their dress code completely.

To be sure, this campaign used a diverse set of tactics, but the legal arguments carried a disproportionate amount of weight. It was as if I was embodying RBG's spirit by using the law to challenge gender discrimination. I wasn't just inspired by Ruth as a person but especially by her methods of revolutionizing the future for women. She learned how to turn legal institutions on their heads by strategically selecting cases that would force the courts to reckon with gender discrimination precedent. Justice Ginsburg's legacy wasn't just from her years on the court; Her impact came from a lifetime of commitment to creating a legal reality in which women could strive toward equality.

She was one of the first lawyers to revolutionize precedent for women. And in her footsteps, so many feminine individuals have followed. On September 18, 2020, heartbreaking news traveled around the world: Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a civil rights icon, had passed away. I remember those moments acutely upon feeling the loss of someone who had given so much out of the conviction that a better world was possible. And in those hollow, tearful hours, the Ruth Project was born.

There is no more honest way to honor such a woman as Ruth Bader Ginsburg than to carry her work forward. She had challenged gender discrimination from a mighty stage, such as that of the Supreme Court, but what about all of the smaller stages where gender discrimination remains unchecked? What about all the students who grow up being told they “had it coming” for wearing a short skirt or showing an inch of stomach? What about all the girls who lose precious learning time because their principal renders their bodies “distracting” and “inappropriate”? What about the students who are ignored when they report sexual harassment and never even know their legal rights to demand better?

**We are those students, and we’re fighting to make sure that there aren’t any more students who have been treated with illegal gender discrimination. The idea of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg is the idea of seeing gender discrimination and utilizing the law to argue for equality. We’re named the Ruth Project because we embody that spirit. From coast to coast, we are an organization that has seen hundreds of faces pass through, determined to be their own Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s in life. There is so much power when we unite and inspire one another to be courageous and fight for our peers. I’ve seen this power as a mentor and leader, as one policy after another becomes reformed by our student advocates. Today marks three years since Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s passing and three years since the inception of the Ruth Project. It is both a day of mourning and a day of celebration. I feel proud to see the impact that we’ve had in carrying Ruth’s mission forward, and I can scarcely find words to describe the inspiration that my fellow advocates have created.**

In three years of advancing the fight for gender justice, we’ve trained dozens of student changemakers across the U.S. and Canada how to be strong grassroots lobbyists and activists, launched several national lobbying (Project 1996) and education (Project Empowerment) campaigns, and have succeeded in changing policies impacting thousands of students. We’ve brought our message to both national and local press organizations a dozen times to advocate for the importance of school dress code reform and support for student survivors of sexual harassment and assault. In three years, we’ve created real change by and for young feminists. We know that as young people, we’re powerful and capable of empowering others, and these convictions are strengthened by inspiring changemakers such as Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

## RUTH'S LIFE AS A CHANGEMAKER

Ginsburg's medium was the law, and her impact continues to be materially felt in our advocacy work. In 1996, Justice Ginsburg led the majority opinion by the Supreme Court in *United States v. Virginia*, in which she argued that gender discrimination in college admissions was unconstitutional. In this case, a female student had been denied admission by the Virginia Military Institute (VMI), at the time an all-male school, solely on grounds of her gender. The court argued that Virginia had no reason that was “exceedingly persuasive and substantially connected to the accomplishment of the government’s objective” to exclude other genders and thus violated the Fourteenth Amendment [1]. Following *United States v. Virginia*, VMI became open to anyone, irrespective of gender, and Justice Ginsburg herself spoke at the graduation of some of the first women to graduate from VMI. This precedent has been extremely impactful beyond college admissions—to this day, it remains one of the strongest precedents in furthering and protecting gender equality. Many legal scholars are arguing that post-VMI interpretations of the Equal Protection Clause offer a strategic route to challenging sexist dress codes, whether or not they are facially neutral [2].

Another key case Justice Ginsburg worked on was *Mortiz v. Commissioner* (1972), which she litigated in her earlier years as a lawyer. Charles Mortiz was not entitled to a tax deduction for taking care of his mother, given that the law assumed only women would apply for tax deductions due to caretaker roles [4]. The court ruled this denial unconstitutional under the Fourteenth Amendment’s right to equal protection under the law [4]. This case shows a key insight into Ginsburg’s strategy as a lawyer—she argued against gender discrimination that was impacting a man, so the precedent would benefit women and gender equality at large.

Justice Ginsburg also argued in favor of the ERA, claiming that it was a strategic route for legal equality. In *My Own Words*, she wrote, “[o]pponents of the amendment suggest the pursuit of alternative routes: particularized statutes through the regular legislative process in Congress and in the states, and test case litigation under the Fourteenth

Amendment. Only those who have failed to learn the lessons of the past can accept that counsel” [3]. In her view, the Equal Rights Amendment, if enacted into the Constitution, could go far beyond the reach of the Fourteenth Amendment or equality bills like Title IX and Title VII and act as a strong legal protection for women. The fight for the ERA continues today, as the power to make the ERA constitutional law lies in the hands of the U.S. Senate. Ruth Bader Ginsburg also co-founded the Women’s Project in the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union). This project has since been extremely influential in women’s rights cases around the country, including dress code litigation.

Prior to becoming the notorious RBG we know today, Ruth was one of the first women to graduate from an Ivy League Law School. She attended college at Cornell, where she met her beloved husband, Martin Ginsburg, and graduated from Columbia Law School in 1959 at the top of her class. But following her graduation, she was denied employment and began teaching as a professor at Rutgers in 1963, where she taught for ten years until she began teaching at Columbia Law School. She was the first woman to become a tenured professor at Columbia Law School. A huge piece of Ruth’s legacy is her time as an educator, teaching future lawyers with a special emphasis on gender discrimination. As an organization built on mentorship and education, we know, just as Ruth did, that the way to keep the fight for justice alive is to empower people to have the knowledge to contribute to that fight.

*“I try to teach through my opinions, through my speeches, how wrong it is to judge people on the basis of what they look like, the color of their skin, whether they’re men or women” – Ruth Bader Ginsburg [5].*

Justice Ginsburg is best known, however, for her time on the U.S. Supreme Court, where she became an icon for change. Her dissents are particularly important to this time, as she was known for her fiery dissents in case rulings she disagreed with. She even had a special collar she wore for when she delivered a dissent. Justice Ginsburg only dissented six times out of twelve terms on the Rehnquist Court (1993-2005), but as the court changed and she became the senior liberal Justice, she became the Roberts Court’s most frequent dissenter. “Dissents speak to a future age. It’s not simply to say my colleagues are wrong and I would do it this way, but the greatest dissents do become court opinions,” she notably claimed [5].

Today, as we reflect on Ruth Bader Ginsburg, we reflect on the importance of carrying her legacy forward amid a push to minimize our rights and send the feminist movement's wins back in time. But we also know that the power of Ruth and other similar feminist icons has propelled us to make a tangible difference in the lives of thousands of students. And we know that this depth of inspiration and passion will continue to carry our movement forward.

Thank you, Ruth.

*In grateful memory of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg: 1933-2020.*



# SOURCES

[1] [A Girl's Right to Bare Arms: An Equal Protection Analysis of Public-School Dress Codes](#)

[2] [Using the Equal Protection Clause PostVMI to Keep Gender Stereotypes Out of the Public School Dress Code Equation](#)

[3] My Own Words by Ruth Bader Ginsburg

[4] [Charles E. Moritz, Petitioner-appellant, v. Commissioner of Internal Revenue, Respondent-appellee, 469 F.2d 466 \(10th Cir. 1972\)](#)

[5] You Can't Spell Truth Without Ruth by Mary Zaia