Justice Ginsburg Recounts a Living History: U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg shares insight into her pioneering path to our nation's highest court

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Ruth Bader Ginsburg never expected to become a role model for aspiring women lawyers. She was just pursuing her passion for the law – one that led all the way to the nation’s highest court.

But, as she recounted in a riveting appearance at Buffalo’s Kleinhans Music Hall, the world was changing as her career took root. She innovated as she went, carving out an extraordinary legal career. And now, at a time when three women sit on the U.S. Supreme Court and 54 percent of UB School of Law’s Class of 2021 are women, she is able to acknowledge her place in helping to make law an equal-opportunity calling.
1. Presidents of the Bar Association of Erie County, the Minority Bar Association of WNY, the UB Law Alumni Association and the WNY Chapter of the Women’s Bar Association of the State of New York join Justice Ginsburg on stage for a conversation led by Dean Aviva Abramovsky.

2. BAEC President Bridget M. O’Connell ‘98 welcomes guests.

3. WBASNY-WNY President Elizabeth M. Fox-Solomon ’06 and MBA-WNY President Brittany A. Jones.

4. LAA President Scott C. Becker ’93 introduces Dean Abramovsky.
“Nowadays it’s exhilarating to see women as law school faculty, as deans and as law students,” Justice Ginsburg said before nearly 3,000 in attendance. “The closed-door era is over. Yes, things are not perfect, but how far we have traveled.”

Her Kleinhans appearance on Aug. 26 followed a full day of activities at UB, and it came on the heels of the Court’s announcement that she had just undergone three weeks of radiation treatment for a recurrence of pancreatic cancer. Yet the 86-year-old justice was determined to fulfill her promise to her longtime friend, Wayne Wisbaum, a prominent Buffalo attorney who invited her to Buffalo before he passed away last December.

Justice Ginsburg was razor sharp during her conversation with Dean Aviva Abramovsky, flashing her trademark wit and citing fact patterns and historical dates with ease. Throughout, she recognized that her long life in the law has encompassed a period of epic historical change. Justice Ginsburg came of age in the 1950s, when many professions were closed to women by tradition or de jure. Asked about women in the law who inspired her early on, she said there simply weren’t any. “Women were fairly rare,” she said. “The law was not a friendly field for women in those days.”

At Harvard Law, where nine women joined 500 men in the 1L class, the dean summoned the women to ask why they were taking a seat from a deserving male student. Her reply: “Dean [Erwin] Griswold, my husband is in the second-year class, and I think it is very important for a woman to understand her husband’s work.”

After her graduation in 1959, she had not a single job offer. But
she taught at Columbia Law School and then represented the American Civil Liberties Union in a number of important civil rights cases before her accession to the bench – “the busiest and most satisfying time of my life up till then,” she said.

Meanwhile, the feminist movement was changing social mores. Justice Ginsburg pointed to her own family experience as an example: When her daughter, born in 1955, was in grade school, “I was one of the few working mothers in her class. By the time my son was born in 1965, it wasn’t at all unusual.”

In the profession, she said, “The big breakthrough came in 1972, because law schools across the country were worried about losing male students to the Vietnam draft. So they over-admitted women.”

And about her unlikely friendship with another Court colleague, Antonin Scalia, Justice Ginsburg said: “Although we disagreed about how to read legal texts, we both cared about the quality of the writing, keeping it clear and concise. We would read each other’s opinions. Sometimes I would say to him, ‘You know, this opinion is so over the top, you would be more persuasive if you toned it down.’ He never took that advice.”

Justice Ginsburg’s appearance in Buffalo was hosted by the University at Buffalo School of Law, the UB Law Alumni Association, the Bar Association of Erie County, the Minority Bar Association of Western New York, and the Western New York Chapter of the Women’s Bar Association of the State of New York.