

My flight with Ruth Bader Ginsburg

By PATRICK J. BURKE
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Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg at the 2020 DVF Awards on February 19, 2020 in Washington, DC. (DIMITRIOS KAMBOURIS/Getty Images for DVF)

Eleven years ago, I boarded the flight home to New York late on a Friday afternoon in late May with my heavy briefcase slung from my shoulder. It had been a tough day of meetings in the D.C. area as in-house counsel for a software company, and I was tired and anxious to get home.

As I approached 8C, an aisle seat which was always my preference, I saw it was occupied by a small elderly woman. I rechecked my boarding pass, confirmed she was in my seat,

and paused to think what to do. The lady looked up at me and said in a voice crackling with apology, “I’m probably in your seat.”

“I’ll find another seat,” I replied. “You stay put.”

“No,” she insisted. “I’ll move.” She pushed up her paper-strewn tray table and began dragging some bags on the floor over toward the window seat. I thanked her, but felt ashamed for putting a senior citizen through that effort.

I settled in, pulled some work papers from my briefcase, and she invited me to share the unoccupied middle seat, where she had a folder and some other items.

“No, thanks,” I said, “All yours.”

I checked my emails, but also gave the woman the once over. She was really tiny, clearly well into her seventies. Her Redweld folder on the middle seat and laser focus on a legal document on her tray table told me she was a lawyer. And she was *working*. She was scribbling all over the pages, in pencil, and she had a system. Every few minutes she put the pencil she had been using in a plastic bag on our middle seat, which was full of blunted pencils, and grabbed a sharp pencil from another bag. She was editing something, in tiny handwriting. She was fully engaged.

As the plane lifted off, I began marking up my own work papers in pen, but exhaustion made it hard to focus. I kept lapsing into guesses about her. Certainly, she was a very serious senior lawyer. Law firms, in my experience, had rarely granted partnerships to women of her generation outside of side practices, like trusts and estates. I settled on that guess. It made sense.

As the plane leveled off, I looked over and noted the name, in Sharpie, on her Redweld, marked “Ginsburg, J.”

Oh, wait! What? I peeked at her again, confirming. Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

Alone on the shuttle? Not likely. I scanned around and met the eyes of a large gentleman ahead of me on the aisle seat, wearing an earpiece with a coiled wire running down into his jacket. I saw his twin across the aisle behind me. That one gave me the eye; not unfriendly, but firm. They were probably Supreme Court marshals, but they weren't going to make me move.

I was working next to one of my biggest heroes. I very much wanted to speak with her, but she was busy. The beverage cart was beginning to work its way down the aisle and I thought, huh, I could ask her if I could get her a beverage. But what would I say, without obviously fawning?

When the moment arrived, I was ready.

“Would you like me to get you a beverage?”

“That would be very nice of you,” she replied.

As I passed the cup over to her, I launched my introduction. “Are you Justice Ginsburg?”

“Yes, I am,” she replied, “and who are you?”

I told her my name, and added, “I have volunteered on a lot of Democratic presidential campaigns, including voter protection projects, in large part to enable the appointment of justices like you.”

“Well, I appreciate that very much,” she replied. “What do you do?”

I explained that I was a lawyer for a software company, which allowed me to write and speak on issues around electronic discovery. The justice said she had attended a judicial talk on e-discovery and understood it was a very important challenge for the legal profession.

Then she switched gears. “Well, you can see that I'm very busy, this is the busiest time of year at the Court.” She opened up her Redweld folder and pointed inside.

“Our session ends in a few weeks and we still have 19 decisions to complete. And some are really important cases.” She described some of the most controversial ones. “I’m working day and night to keep these moving. We always have this crunch at this time of year, but they still expect me to attend the Second Circuit Judicial Conference next week! I can’t believe the Second Circuit doesn’t think about that, I really don’t have time right now. But I’m the Justice assigned to the circuit, and so I have to attend. But it makes no sense!”

Wow, I thought, she’s kvetching! How cool. How much like a fellow New York lawyer!

We chatted for another minute before she returned to work. She was looking forward to a weekend in New York and needed to make some progress.

I felt a fresh wave of energy for my own work.

The plane landed at LaGuardia and taxied to the gate. We both packed up our work.

I asked her if I could get her anything from the luggage compartment. “That would be nice,” she replied, “I have a red bag up there.” I lifted the compartment door and reached for the bag, but much larger hands got to it first. The two marshals escorted the Justice out of her row and into the aisle, one in front, one behind.

As the justice was about to pass me, she turned, put her hand on my shoulder and said, “I just want to thank you for your public service.” As I watched her move up the aisle, I pondered her appreciation. I had not thought of my election work as public service before. But, clearly, she did.

I followed the decisions issued by the Court over the coming weeks, particularly those she had described to me, and on which I had watched her toil. I could not help thinking how our democracy enabled this tiny vulnerable woman, with her ferocious intelligence, to rise to the top of our field and how we, in turn, were indebted to her.

Burke is a lawyer.