

Vanessa Ruiz

Judge Vanessa Ruiz was born and raised in Puerto Rico, where Spanish was her first language. She was exposed to the law as a child through her father, a litigator. At 18, she came to the United States to attend Wellesley College, and in 1975, she received a law degree from Georgetown University Law Center. She spent nearly 20 years first in private practice and then in public service before she was appointed in 1994 to the D.C. Court of Appeals (DC's highest court), the first—and thus far only—Hispanic member of the court.

As Judge Ruiz has stated, “The arc of my career, to put it charitably, has been organic.” Her legal career began at Fried Frank, focusing on international commercial transactions. When just five years out of law school, she successfully argued an important civil rights case before the U.S. Supreme Court on a *pro bono* basis, becoming one of the first women lawyers to appear before the Court during Justice O'Connor's first term. She then joined Sears World Trade, Inc. as senior counsel and in 1987 co-founded Sloan, Lehner & Ruiz, an international litigation boutique, which later merged with Pepper, Hamilton & Scheetz, where she became partner. Four years later, she redirected her career to public service with the Office of the D.C. Corporation Counsel and quickly worked her way up to become corporation counsel (now the D.C. attorney general), the first Hispanic chief legal officer for the District of Columbia. In 1994, President Clinton appointed her to the D.C. Court of Appeals, and she remains today its longest-serving woman currently active on the court.

Throughout her judicial career, Judge Ruiz has understood her responsibility as a judge to extend beyond the courtroom, and she has reached out to the Hispanic community and those who often are overlooked or uninformed—in particular, immigrants—to make them feel welcome and enhance their understanding of and access to American courts. She has been a long-time friend, mentor, and supporter of the D.C. Hispanic and Women's Bar Associations. Judge Ruiz consistently serves as a mentor to Latino and other law students and speaks to students at all levels about the courts. She serves as a member of the District of Columbia's Access to Justice Commission, whose mission is to increase civil legal representation for indigent persons, and was the first judge to serve on the D.C. Bar's Pro Bono Program Committee.

Committed to the inclusion and advancement of women in the profession and in the judiciary, she was elected president of the National Association of Women Judges (NAWJ), where she spoke and wrote forcefully about the importance of diversity to a truly independent judiciary. During her tenure as president, she initiated NAWJ's annual meeting of judicial leaders from across the country with the women serving in the U.S. Congress, to increase understanding between the legislative and judicial branches. She has developed and presented one of NAWJ's flagship judicial educational programs, *Removing Obstacles to Justice for Immigrants*, which highlights how immigration laws can have an impact on women and children in court proceedings, addresses the obstacles to justice faced by immigrants in the judicial system, and informs judges about how immigration issues can affect and be affected by judicial proceedings in federal and state courts. An active board member of the International Association of Women Judges, she interacts with women judges from other countries to safeguard the legal rights of women and girls around the world. She is a trustee of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and a member of the American Law Institute.

Judge Ruiz has been described as being “as much a teacher as she is a judge.” She is committed to the professional development of others and, even after her law clerks move on, remains a valued source for advice and mentorship. She has actively encouraged other women to seek judgeships and shares herself with colleagues at all levels. Judge Ruiz has provided inspirational leadership and tutelage to generations of Latinas and other women and minorities seeking to enter, advance, and assume positions of leadership in the national and international legal and judicial communities. She continues to personally mentor countless women and minority law students, law clerks, lawyers, and younger judges, many of whose lives have been forever changed as a result of her attention, assistance, and inspiration.



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