

TAX *Bites*

Meeting Justice Sotomayor: Or a Lesson in Email Etiquette?

By Ann Murphy*

I felt as though I had won the lottery. I had the opportunity to sit down and speak with Justice Sonia Sotomayor in her chambers at the U.S. Supreme Court. By myself. How did this happen? I am a law professor, but I am hardly Supreme Court “chat material.” Why did Justice Sotomayor sit down with me, a tax law professor at a small private law school located in Washington state, one that is not ranked by *U.S. News and World Report* as being in the top 50 law schools in America?

Because she is nice. Incredibly nice.

This all came about because I had made a big blunder. A gigantic mistake. I refer to this when I speak to my students as my “most embarrassing moment” professionally. I sent a “reply all” email to Justice Sotomayor in October of 2009.

I was on our faculty recruitment committee and Justice Sotomayor sent the members of the committee a letter of recommendation for her former law clerk—a wonderful potential candidate for a faculty position. When I received the email, at first I thought it must be one of my high school friends playing a joke on me—I mean, really—an email from a sitting Supreme Court justice? When I read it, I realized it indeed was from Justice Sotomayor and I thought, “Wow! This candidate has a letter of recommendation from a Supreme Court justice.” Thinking that was really amazing, I sent an email to my coworkers on the committee. I really thought I was being funny when I wrote the following:

“Show Off. Seriously—Wow!”

Little did I realize I had actually replied to ALL, the other members of the Committee AND Justice Sotomayor.

It was not until the next morning—on a plane making my way to Washington, D.C., to interview this great candidate and others that my Dean said to me, “Nice email skills, Murphy!” I was actually making my way down the aisle of the plane and I thought—what is he talking about? Now, I send plenty of what I think are humorous emails, but I just could not recall any particular email to which he might be referring. As I took my seat in the back of the plane, it hit me. Oh. My. Gosh. I had sent the email to Justice Sotomayor! After a minor panic attack, I convinced myself that surely she would not read her own email—of course someone on her staff would do that and undoubtedly delete my ridiculous email.

When I arrived in D.C., I opened my computer and clicked on to my email. I saw I had received an email from Justice Sotomayor. I just sat there staring at my computer. Was she writing to indicate that she believed I had engaged in completely inappropriate behavior? Did she send a letter to my Dean and the President of the University with her view that I should be fired posthaste? No. She wrote “I think I owe you a thank you.” I truly could not believe it. What a kind and generous thing to do.

I sent her an apology email in reply and we traded messages by email. She could not have been nicer. At the end of the last email she indicated that she hoped too that we could meet some day.

That was in October of 2009. In January 2012, I was scheduled to attend the Association of American Law Schools conference in D.C. I saw she was introducing Judge Cabranes of the Second Circuit at our luncheon. I wrote to her to see if I could shake her hand. I did realize half the world would want to shake her hand as well, so I indicated that I knew she was busy and if that was not possible I completely understood. Amazingly, she invited me to the Supreme Court to meet her. Not only did I meet this gracious and wonderful justice, I also was able to speak with her in her chambers for about 20 minutes (but we did not discuss any tax cases), and she later arranged for me to have a private tour of the Supreme Court. It was truly one of the highlights of my life.

This Supreme Court justice is kind, generous, and truly thoughtful. How lucky we are to have her on our Supreme Court. And how lucky I was to be able to meet her. It reminds me that it is important to be kind to everyone—even lowly tax professors.

Editor’s Note: *NewsQuarterly* welcomes short submissions in this vein for publication in future issues.

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