

Locals praise 'down to earth' Sotomayor

Portland lawyer who dined with new justice says she's a role model for all

By **JIM REDDEN**
The Tribune

The day before Sonia Sotomayor was sworn in as the first Hispanic and third female member of the U.S. Supreme Court, dozens of people gathered in downtown Portland to celebrate the historic event.

Although everyone at the Aug. 7 reception organized by the Hispanic Metropolitan Chamber had reason to be happy, Portland lawyer Román D. Hernández was especially proud.

Hernández is president-elect of the Hispanic National Bar Association, which endorsed Sotomayor for the court and testified in her support at the contentious U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee hearings.

"We endorsed her twice before," Hernández says. "The first time was when she was appointed to the U.S. District

Court by the first President Bush, and the second time was when she was appointed to the Court of Appeals by President Clinton."

Not only did the Hispanic bar provide testimony, but Hernández personally met Sotomayor on July 17. It happened during a private dinner at the home of Maryland attorney Mari Carmen Aponte, a former president of the association and longtime friend of Sotomayor.

"I was taken aback by how easygoing, down to earth and approachable she was," Hernández says. "I think that had to do with her life experiences, which included being from a humble background and working her way up through the ranks of her profession."

Best example of opportunity

As Hernández sees it, Sotomayor's life story is relevant to all Americans, regardless of their



SOTOMAYOR

gender, race or ethnic backgrounds.

"She is a role model for the entire country," he says.

But Hernández also admits that Sotomayor's confirmation to the court is particularly significant for Hispanics.

"She is the first Hispanic to be appointed to the Supreme Court, one of three co-equal branches of government," he says.

According to Hernández, Sotomayor's nomination and confirmation should be followed by even more Hispanic involvement in public institutions.

"Hispanics are 15 percent of the population now," Hernández says. "By 2015 they will be 30 percent."

The Hispanic chamber's Aug. 7 reception at Quintana Galleries included tributes to Sotomayor and a champagne toast to "a very wise Latina."

Chamber Executive Director



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Portland attorney Román D. Hernández is president-elect of the Hispanic National Bar Association.

Gale Castillo agrees with Hernández that Sotomayor's accomplishment is meaningful to everyone.

"She is the best example of the many opportunities that are available in this country for all Amer-

icans," Castillo says. "She sends a strong message to our young men and women that if you work hard and get a good education, you too can reach the highest level in our great country."

Like Hernández, many of the people who attended the reception were Hispanic-Americans who are making a difference in their communities. He is the first Hispanic shareholder in the prestigious Schwabe, Williamson, & Wyatt law firm and past president of the Hispanic Metropolitan Chamber, which works to increase the economic advancement of Hispanic-owned businesses in the region.

He also serves on the board of directors of the Oregon Health and Science University, the city's largest employer with a \$1.4 billion budget.

Hernandez, like Sotomayor, also knows what it means to come from a humble back-

ground. He is the youngest of eight children born to migrant farm workers who emigrated from Mexico 50 years ago. After they settled in Eastern Oregon, Hernández grew up working the fields with the rest of his family.

Hernández did farm work up until two weeks before he left for Oregon State University, where he earned his bachelor of science degree before joining the U.S. Air Force. After rising to the rank of captain, he was honorably discharged and enrolled in the Lewis & Clark Law School, where he obtained his law degree. He is admitted to practice law in Oregon and Washington state courts, federal courts located in Oregon and Washington, and before the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals.

Hernández will begin serving a one-year term as president of the National Hispanic Bar Association in September.

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