

# PUBLICATION

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## Strength: An Interview with Baker Donelson Alum James C. Duff on Justice Ginsburg

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*James C. Duff, director of the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, Counselor to Chief Justice William Rehnquist, and former managing shareholder of Baker Donelson's Washington, D.C. office, reflects upon his memories of the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg in this interview with Sheila P. Burke, chair of Baker Donelson's Government Relations and Public Policy Group.*

When the Counselor to Chief Justice Roberts called me at home to let me know that Justice Ginsburg had just passed away, I was shocked, of course. Within moments, however, I thought how remarkable it was that I was shocked. She was 87-years-old. She had five bouts with cancer. Five! I suppose I was shocked because she had made miraculous recoveries four times before over the past 21 years, and we had come to expect miracles from her.

I first met Justice Ginsburg in 1996 when I was appointed Counselor to Chief Justice Rehnquist. Three years later in 1999, she had her first bout with cancer – colon cancer. She later had lung cancer. Then pancreatic cancer – three different times. She was simply the strongest person I have ever known. She succeeded Justice Byron White on the Bench who, up until that time, was the strongest person I had ever known. Justice White played pro football in the NFL. He had a handshake that would bring you to your knees. He was 6'2" and weighed about 190 pounds – all muscle (and brains). I don't know Justice Ginsburg's statistics, but I am guessing she weighed about half as much as Justice White. She was stronger.

In 2018, she fell in her chambers. The evening of the day she fell, I attended an award ceremony at the Court with her. She sat through the entire ceremony. She was a very soft-spoken person, but that evening she was quieter than usual. Later that night, she checked into a hospital where they informed her that she had three broken ribs. The pain she endured through that ceremony must have been severe, yet she sat quietly through the entire event. And she did not miss a day of work at the Court afterwards. These are things from which sports legends are made.

Her physical strength may have surprised some, camouflaged in a small frame. Her intellectual strength, however, was on full display. Her forceful and well-reasoned opinions and questioning from the Bench will serve our country as a model for generations. Her students when she was a professor at Columbia Law School still speak of her as their best teacher. She will be remembered particularly as a champion of women's rights, as well she should be. But I will remember her for her kindnesses to all. She was an extraordinarily thoughtful person, especially for someone with such a full and busy life. She took time to send handwritten, personal notes on all occasions – treasures for all who received them. She was loved and admired by her colleagues and will be greatly missed.

She combined her physical and mental strengths to improve life for all of us. I once used a phrase to describe the great Tennessean John Seigenthaler that applies equally, perhaps even more so, to Ruth Bader Ginsburg – she ran through the finish line, not to the finish line. That should inspire us all.

