



## How Photojournalist Sarahbeth Maney Captured History

She made one of the most iconic photographs of Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson's Supreme Court confirmation hearings. But it almost didn't happen. Sarahbeth shares how she jockeyed to get into the room, the payoff on her patience, and the way she gives agency to her subjects.

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Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson:

I'm saving a special moment in this introduction for my daughters, Talia and Leila. Girls, I know it has not been easy as I've tried to navigate the challenges of juggling my career and motherhood, and I fully admit that I did not always get the balance right, but I hope that you've seen that with hard work, determination, and love, it can be done.

Alicia Menendez: That was Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson at her confirmation hearing to become the first Black woman nominated and confirmed to the Supreme Court. For me and for lots of working moms, that moment resonated so deeply. And then like salve for our soul came what might be the most enduring image of the hearing. Jackson's 17-year-old daughter, Leila, gazing adoringly at her mother who, like so many women of color, was blazing the trail of the first and only. That photo was made by Sarahbeth Maney, a photojournalist at The New York Times. And Sarahbeth is here to talk about how it happened, what it meant to her, and why who captures history matters. Sarahbeth, hello.

Sarahbeth Maney: Hi! Thank you for having me.

Menendez: Do you remember the first time that someone put a camera in your hands?

Maney: The first camera I remember having was this pink Sony point and shoot camera. I think I got that camera in the third or the fourth grade because I kept asking my mom for a camera for Christmas. But I just remember taking my camera to school with me all the time and photographing my friends during recess and going to slumber parties and documenting the whole night. My father, who passed away when I was 10, he always had a camera on him, so it was sort of in my DNA.

Menendez: Can you tell me, as someone who has only consumed, but never produced this, what makes a great journalistic photo?

Maney: For me, I think what makes a great photo is emotion. That's something that I'm always looking for when I'm making photos. Even when it's just a typical day on Capitol Hill. I don't necessarily photograph what things look like. I photograph what things feel like.

Menendez: What about the ethos of your work hooks into your own life experience?

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Maney: At this point in my life, I'm not religious anymore, but I grew up very religious. In the church all the time. I'm grateful that I did because I was exposed to a lot of different communities. I was doing volunteer work every single weekend. I was working with the houseless population around the Bay Area, which is a huge topic in the Bay Area. So that really exposed me to a lot of things really young. At 14, I was volunteering in Skid Row in Los Angeles and I was talking to people and learning about their stories. I remember there was one day where I was talking to a woman. Her name was Melinda Newsom. She told me her story and how she ended up to be homeless because she was in the military and was discharged and didn't have a place to go. After speaking with her, I remember just walking away and thinking, man, I wish I had my camera so that I could make a photo of her and share her story with other people. And so, at 14, I sort of knew that I wanted to be a photojournalist before I even knew what photojournalism was. I had no idea that it was even a career path. Just all of these life experiences and the way that I grew up, I think, really exposed me early on to what my future would look like.

Menendez: Let's talk about Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson's confirmation hearings. You knew, once she was set to have those hearings, that you wanted to be in the room. That is not a given. That everyone who wants to be in that room gets to be in that room. What kind of advocacy did you do for yourself to make sure you were going to be there?

Maney: Early on, when I found out that President Biden was nominating a Black woman to the Supreme Court, I raised my hand and I told my editors, "I'd really like to contribute to any coverage that I can." And I just kept sending reminders until that time came. When Judge Jackson got to Capitol Hill and started meeting with senators, I made sure that I followed her to as many meetings as I could. Even if that meant just her walking down a hallway. I felt like the more I go and show my face and the more I'm there, the more, maybe, access I'll be able to get, the more that she'll recognize me, and we can sort of start building the connection. She met with 97 senators in a matter of three weeks. I went to a handful of those meetings and I stayed late a lot of days, following her around. And then I made sure that I was there for every day of those hearings as well.

Menendez: Tell me about that rapport that you just referenced between yourself and someone like Judge Jackson. I mean, for all of the people that you shoot, is there relationship building that goes into that work?

Maney: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. As a photojournalist, our role is very personal because we're asking to make a photo of somebody which can be really scary. To have your image ingrained in a history book forever. And so I always like to build relationships so that people can feel a little more comfortable around me and comfortable around my presence when I'm making photos of them. Because I think it's really important for the person on the other side of the camera to feel like they can trust me. So yeah. When I would see Judge Jackson walking through the hallways, there were a couple times where I maybe made a joke or made a comment and so she became a little familiar with me. And then, when it came time where I was able to actually meet her one-on-one, just after the photo went

viral, she already thought that we met. She's like, "Oh, we already know each other." So I thought that was pretty cool.

Menendez: Tell me about the moment you caught that photo of Leila.

Maney: When I made that photo of Leila, I was peering over the edge of a wall on the side of the room. I was standing on top of a step stool so that I could be at the same height as my colleagues. This was during a time at the end of the hearings where things were kind of slowing down a bit. I was looking around thinking like, okay, what pictures can I make next? I feel like I've made a lot of different variations of photos. At that moment, Senator Dick Durbin started giving Judge Jackson words of affirmation and praising her. Speaking on her accomplishments. I remember looking over and seeing Leila smile.

Maney: I didn't have my camera to up to my face yet and so I sort of just looked at her and I smiled back and I processed what that moment might have felt like for her. I thought about my own mother. What would it feel like to see my mother sitting in that seat? Because I know what it's like to create a seat at the table and I know what it's like to watch my mother work extremely hard. And so it made me sort of emotional in that moment. That's when I lifted up my camera, hoping that she would make that same exact expression again. I was sort of talking to myself under my breath. Like, come on, come on, come on. And then, when she did it again, I was just like, okay, I got it. I got the photo. I had no idea that it would resonate with so many people. I just knew that it was really special for me and it made me feel something really relatable.

Menendez: Part of what I love about that story is that the prime spots in that room are really in the center of that room. That is the ideal angle. Most of the photos that we process are from that angle. You are on the side of the room, which feels to me like a perfect metaphor for women of color in professional spaces. Trying to use what could be perceived as a deficit, a bias, a limitation, and instead having to jujitsu it into a strength.

Maney: Right. When we look at photos from these hearings, the most symbolic image is always the person testifying or speaking who raises their right hand at the table. It's always taken from the well position, which is the center position on the floor. When I went home that evening after the first day of the hearings, I remember going on Instagram and I was seeing that everybody was posting that same photo of Judge Jackson with her hand up. And I thought, I want to share something that was really unique to my experience and something that really resonated with me. That was what steered me to share that image of Leila and share something a little different that we hadn't seen yet.

Maney: You mentioned that oftentimes people of color and photographers of color are on the sides of the room. On the second day, I sent out a text to all the Black photographers that were there that day and I told them, "Hey, let's get together and take a group picture." Because I knew that, on the first day, we weren't visible because we were on the sides. I wanted people to know that we actually were in the room and that we were making pictures. Because for me, whenever I'm watching documentaries on Netflix and looking at archival footage, I'm always looking for, where is that woman of color in the well? Where is



that Black woman? Where is that Latino woman making photos? And so I just really wanted people to see that we were there.

Menendez: Sarahbeth, you said that seeing Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson reminded you so much of your own mom. Tell me more about your mom.

Maney: Growing up, I was raised by a single mother. I watched her working three jobs when I was in elementary school and junior high school. That really set the standard for me of what hard work and sacrifice looks like. And so I could really feel that while I was listening to the hearings. The thing that my mother always told me was, "Just do your best." She didn't want me to be A plus student or the valedictorian or whatever. She just wanted me to do my best. Whatever that looked like for me. I think it was really special that she instilled that in me. Just focus on whatever my best is. And so I really... I always carry that with me. My mom is also my best friend. I feel like my mom is the person that I can go to for anything. She's always been extremely supportive of my career as a photojournalist. My mother was an artist when she wasn't working. She really gave me free range as a child to just explore artistically. I remember we had this door in our kitchen that started off with white paint on it and she let me paint a whole mural on it. That's something really unique, I think, as a parent. To say, "Hey, you can paint on this thing in our house and we can do it together."

Menendez: When, all of a sudden, everyone was sharing the photo and everyone was talking about the photo, I saw a lot of references to you as a young Black female photographer who'd grown up in the Bay Area. And that is all true. You are also Latina. I wonder if that experience of being coded incompletely has happened before in your life.

Maney: Yeah, absolutely. I feel like I always grew up sort of playing a game of tug-o-pull with my identity because I am Latina and I am Black. There were times where it felt challenging to know what do I identify with more? Because I grew up in a Latina household with two Latina women, but going to school as a kid and not having many other people of color in that school, I was always just referred to as the Black girl. That was very real for me as a child and so I accepted the fact that, okay, maybe I am just Black or maybe I am just Latina. As I got older, I think I started accepting and exploring what my own identity meant for me and less of what it meant for other people. And so, now, I do strongly identify as both Latina and Black.

Menendez: I also think that part of it is that the story, the narrative, was about the incredible history of the first Black woman on the Supreme Court. I wonder if you had taken a similar photo during Sonia Sotomayor's confirmation, if you then would've immediately been coded as Latina because it would've fit the narrative of the moment.

Maney: That's the interesting thing when we're talking about identity. It's something that I've always been really uncomfortable talking about because it's taking me so long to figure it out. And so now that I'm talking about it, it's just this really scary but-

Menendez: Scary because you're afraid of saying something wrong?

Maney: Absolutely. And I feel like being able to identify with both of those things, it's a balance. Because, obviously, for the confirmation hearings, I identified as a woman of color, but also very strongly as a Black woman because being Black is a very singular experience at



times. A lot of my experience has been defined or shaped by other people because we really respond to race based on our own experiences. People can look at me and make an assumption just based on their own environment.

Menendez: I think you wrote this in Oprah Daily and I really liked it, which is you talk about how your profession is a tough business to break into. It requires resources, long hours dedicated to building a portfolio often for little or no pay, and expensive equipment that is not accessible to most people. I mean, a lot of those barriers to entry or why we don't see more people of color in your line of work. Do you have a sense of what it would take to begin to address those barriers?

Maney: Yeah. I think that lack of resources is the main reason why we don't see more Black women and women of color pursuing photojournalism. Because it's not just a job that you hop into. It's really a lifestyle that you take time to invest a lot of money into and time. Like I said in that article, I did a lot of work for free just to build my portfolio. Not to mention the time researching stories. The way that I did it was... The thing that helped me the most was being able to live at home during my time in college. I am a first generation college student, so just getting to college was a huge barrier.

Maney: I remember, when I was in high school applying for colleges, I had this college advisor who said, "Don't let money be the reason you don't go to college." I went home that day and I told my parents that and they were kind of like, "Whoa, okay. What can we do?" And so I gave them a flyer and they went to this class where they learned about the prerequisites I needed and financial aid and how it could help me get through college. And so I was able to get through college solely on FAFSA, scholarships, and grants. I was able to get through it debt free, but I had to work my ass off to do that. Luckily, I had the support of my parents, my mom and my stepdad, who let me live in the house with them, who paid for my BART so that I could get to school every day, public transportation. It was a journey. It was really a journey to get to where I am.

Menendez: Sarahbeth, once you have a photo not just go viral, but a photo that will now become an iconic part of history... You will have kids one day and they will read history textbooks that have a 50% shot of having your photo in that textbook and they will say, "My mom took this photo. My mom was in the room when this moment happened." When you have something iconic like that happened so early in your career, how is it shaping your thinking about where you take your career from this moment?

Maney: That's a tough question. Because, for me, I'm always thinking in the opposite way. I'm thinking of what am I doing right now and I'm always focused on the present moment. I don't tend to think too far ahead because I... As a photojournalist, I feel like it's easy to get swept up in the news cycle and not live in the moment and so I try to force myself to operate so that I'm just thinking in the present. And I'm always carrying what my mom told me. Just do your best. Do the best you can. That's really all I'm thinking about. But I hope that, 10 years from now, whatever that does look like, this image really serves as an inspiration to women to feel like they can be in these spaces that were not historically designed for us to be in. They can look back and see that I was there 10 years ago and



that Judge Jackson was sitting there and Leila was sitting there and that this is what the room looked like. I hope that that can just continue to inspire people and continue to create this ripple effect of conversations that I've seen so many people having about representation and why it's important.

Menendez: Sarahbeth, thank you so much for doing this.

Maney: Thank you. This was amazing.

Menendez: Thank you as always for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Manuela Bedoya is our marketing lead. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer and mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. It makes our day. Email us at [hola@latinatolatina.com](mailto:hola@latinatolatina.com). Slide into our DMs on Instagram. Tweet us @LatinatoLatina. Check out our merchandise that is on our website, [Latinatolatina.com/shop](http://Latinatolatina.com/shop). And remember, please subscribe or follow us on Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Goodpods, wherever you are listening right now. Every time you share this podcast, every time you share an episode, every time you leave a review, it helps us to grow as a community.

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