Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Gloria Steinem on the Unending Fight for Women's Rights

The two longtime friends discuss everything from rap names to the moments that spurred them to action.

Table for Three By PHILIP GALANES NOV. 14, 2015 The New York Times

The room went still when the women hugged. All of the staff, bustling in preparation just moments before, paused when Ruth Bader Ginsburg emerged quietly from her private chambers at the Supreme Court last month and embraced her old friend Gloria Steinem.

And just as quickly, life resumed. Justice Ginsburg, 82, led Ms. Steinem, 81, into her wood-paneled chambers, with its stately traditional furniture and blue-chip modern art by Mark Rothko and Josef Albers (on loan from the National Gallery of Art and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden). "What a magical place, Ruth," Ms. Steinem said.

Justice Ginsburg gestured to an immaculately set table in the corner, tucked beside shelves of mementos and personal photographs — including one of the two women together. She offered tea, cookies and chocolates she had brought back from a recent trip to Zurich.

These women have a history. Long before she was crowned "Notorious R.B.G." — a nod to the tough-guy rapper Notorious B.I.G. — for her fierce intellect, Justice Ginsburg was a trailblazing litigator for women's rights. Beginning in the early 1970s, as a professor at Columbia Law School, its first tenured woman, and as a founder of the American Civil Liberties Union's Women's Rights Project, she successfully argued five cases before the Supreme Court, focusing on laws and government policies built on gender stereotypes.

At about the same time, Ms. Steinem founded Ms. magazine with some feminist colleagues, after a decade as a journalist in which she tried, and mostly failed, by her account, to interest editors in serious articles on women's rights. Still, she published seminal articles, like one detailing her stint as a Playboy bunny to highlight the sexist treatment of women at Playboy Clubs, and a pioneering work in 1969, "After Black Power, Women's Liberation."

Justice Ginsburg was appointed by President Jimmy Carter to the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit in 1980. In 1993, President Bill Clinton elevated her to the Supreme Court, making her the court's second female justice, following Sandra Day O'Connor. (Justice Ginsburg is the subject of a tribute biography, "Notorious RBG: The Life and Times of Ruth Bader Ginsburg," by Irin Carmon and Shana Knizhnik.)

Meanwhile, Ms. Steinem was an editor at Ms. for nearly 20 years, becoming the public face of the women's movement. (She continues at the magazine as an adviser.) She has traveled extensively, speaking out for women's and human rights, winning numerous awards for her work in media and advocacy, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2013. Her new book, "My Life on the Road," was published last month.

For nearly 90 minutes, the old friends reminisced about their parallel careers and experiences as women, and the work that has made them part of history.

Philip Galanes: Let's start with a glaring inequity. Only one of you has a rap name.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg: I like the way mine began. A second-year law student at N.Y.U. was outraged by the court's decision in the voting rights case. But instead of just venting her anger, she took up my dissent.

PG: Happily, there are rap-name generators online.

Gloria Steinem: They have those?

PG: Yours, if you want it, is GlowStick.

GS: We may need to work on that.

President Bill Clinton with his nominee for the Supreme Court Ruth Bader Ginsburg on June 14, 1993. Credit Doug Mills/Associated Press

PG: Rap names aside, your careers unfolded side by side at the forefront of the women's movement. When did you meet?

GS: When Ruth was at the A.C.L.U. What comes to mind are these cases in which young African-American women were being sterilized without their permission.

RBG: There was an irony. We couldn't get abortions. But there was this notorious obstetrician, and if it was a woman's third child, he would automatically sterilize her.

GS: The A.C.L.U. would not have taken up that case if it hadn't been for Ruth.

PG: Were you a Ms. reader?

RBG: I certainly was. From the first issue. I thought it was wonderful.

GS: And I knew from other women that Ruth was our champion and teacher.

PG: When you were young, women couldn't rent apartments or get credit cards without men. Did you buy into that?

RBG: Gloria went to Smith; I went to Cornell. It was the school for parents who wanted to make sure their girl would find a man. Four guys for every woman. If you came out without a husband, you were hopeless.

PG: Was Smith more enlightened in the early '50s?

GS: It was a women's college, but the emphasis was on marriage. Even the Smith president of the era said, "We are educating women because to have educated children, we must have educated mothers." The idea that women would do something other than produce children was not out there.

PG: Time for galling stories: Will you tell us more about that dinner of brand-new Harvard law women, when the dean invited all nine of you, from a class of 500, and asked, "How do you justify taking a spot from a qualified man?"

RBG: I was so embarrassed. The dean had each of the women escorted by a distinguished professor. Mine looked more like God than any man I ever met. He was also a chain smoker, so we were sharing an ashtray on my lap. When I stood to speak, the cigarette butts fell on the living-room floor. But I gave him the answer he expected: "My husband is a second-year law student, and it's important for a woman to understand her husband's work."

PG: Did you really think that?

RBG: Of course not!

GS: That's called "Aunt Tom-ing," I think.

RBG: The only thing that really bothered me is they had given me a generous scholarship. We had to take two years off when [my husband] Marty was in the service. And when I applied for readmission, they said, "Submit your father-in-law's financial statement."

GS: You can’t make this up.

RBG: They shouldn’t give scholarship funds to a person with family money, but you can be sure they never asked a guy to submit his father-in-law’s statement.

GS: Or his mother-in-law’s.

Betty Friedan at an early meeting of the National Women's Political Caucus.Credit Don Hogan Charles/The New York Times

PG: Now, Gloria's turn: Early in your career, you're sitting in the back of a cab, between Gay Talese and Saul Bellow, and Gay says: "Every year a pretty girl comes to New York and pretends to be a writer. This year, it's Gloria." Any desire to push him out the door?

GS: I had just interviewed Saul Bellow in Chicago, but it wasn't published yet. My first response was, "Oh, he's going to be regretful that he gave an interview to someone who's not really a writer." It wasn't until we were out of the taxi that I got angry. And it wasn't until years later that I got really angry.

PG: But your first thought was to doubt yourself.

GS: And in a weird way, to be fair to Gay Talese, he thought it was a compliment. He didn't see that I wanted to be a serious writer.

PG: Let's take a step back to your mothers, very different women. R.B.G.'s pushes her; Gloria's is seriously depressed. Yet these different women raised such independent daughters.

GS: Perhaps we were living out the unlived lives of our mothers. Mine wanted to be a writer and was a journalist long before I was born. First as a reporter, then an editor at a Toledo newspaper.

RBG: My mother was a powerful influence. She made me toe the line. If I didn't have a perfect report card, she showed her disappointment.

PG: Had she been a "perfect report card" kind of girl?

RBG: She told a story about bringing home a report card with all A's to her father. But it didn't mean anything. She was a girl. My mother graduated from high school at 15 and went to work to support the family because the eldest son went to college.

'I had three strikes against me. First, I was Jewish, and the Wall Street firms were just beginning to accept Jews. Then I was a woman. But the killer was my daughter Jane, who was 4 by then.' - Ruth Bader Ginsburg

GS: So you were receiving her dreams. She was saying the opposite to you: not that your report card didn't count, but that it did.

RBG: She wanted me to be independent. And what she meant was becoming a high school history teacher because she never dreamed there would be other opportunities.

PG: Did you?

RBG: Not at the time.

PG: Choosing law and political reporting was uncommon for women in the '50s. Did you have mentors helping you?

GS: In a word, no. For me, writing was a way of staying invisible because I felt invisible, only a little seen through words. I didn't yet have the courage to speak up.

PG: Was your family supportive?

GS: My mother worried about me economically. But my father had inadvertently prepared me well to be a freelance writer by being such a free spirit and never having a regular job.

RBG: My mother was dead by then, and my father was very worried because he couldn't support me. Then I married Marty the month I graduated from college, and it was all fine. I could go off to law school. If nobody hired me, I had a man to support me.

PG: Weirdly, he was right. No one hired the woman who graduated No. 1 in her class.

RBG: There were many firms who put up sign-up sheets that said, "Men Only." And I had three strikes against me. First, I was Jewish, and the Wall Street firms were just beginning to accept Jews. Then I was a woman. But the killer was my daughter Jane, who was 4 by then.

PG: They didn't even hide why they were rejecting you?

GS: No. I tried to get a much less prestigious job, at Time magazine. And they made it very clear that women researched, and men wrote. No exceptions, in spite of Clare Boothe Luce.

PG: You remind me of my grandmother's line: Rejection is the best thing that can happen. It pushes us. There might not be a Ms. magazine or Notorious R.B.G. without it.

GS: But there might not be a need for a woman's magazine, and there might be a court that actually looks like the country. There's no virtue in injustice.

RBG: Justice O'Connor once said: "Suppose there had been no discrimination when we finished law school. We'd be retired partners from large law firms today." She got her first job working for free for a county attorney, and she was very high in her class at Stanford.

GS: The great thing about obstacles is that they cause you to identify with other groups of people who are facing obstacles.

PG: When did you start thinking seriously about women's equality?

RBG: When I was working on a book about civil procedure in Sweden, in 1962 and '63.

GS: For which she learned Swedish. Is that not incredible?

RBG: Between 20 and 25 percent of the law students in Sweden were women. And there were women on the bench. I went to one proceeding in Stockholm where the presiding judge was eight months pregnant. There was also a journalist who wrote a column in the Swedish daily paper: "Why should women have two jobs, and men only one?" Inflation was high, and two incomes were often needed. But it was the woman who was expected to buy the kids new shoes and have dinner on the table at 7. I remember listening to those conversations. It was that same summer I read "The Second Sex."

GS: For me, an important point came when I was living in India, because of the Gandhian movement and the role of women in it. But I was slow to see how it applied here. I couldn't quite bridge that gap until the late '60s.

PG: How did people respond when you first raised concerns about equality for women?

GS: They were either disinterested or said it was impossible. My classic experience was an editor who said, "O.K., you can publish an article saying women are equal." But right next to it, he would publish an article that said that they weren't — to be objective.

RBG: The concern was that if a woman was doing gender equality, her chances of making it to tenure in the law school were diminished. It was considered frivolous.

GS: I remember covering a hearing in Albany about liberalizing the abortion laws. This was before Roe v. Wade. And they invited to testify 14 men and one nun. A group of women said: "Wait a minute. Let's have our own testimony from women who had this experience." That was my epiphany. But when I wrote about it, my friends at New York magazine, good people, took me aside and said: "You've worked so hard to be taken seriously. Don't get involved with these crazy women."

RBG: The thing that disturbed me was when people would say: "What are those women doing? They're just riding the coattails of the civil rights movement." Yet this change was occurring all over the world, even in homogeneous places, like Sweden, where there were no racial differences. Of course, there was tremendous inspiration from the civil rights movement, and for me, particularly the way Thurgood Marshall led that campaign.

GS: It's important to say that the women's movement was disproportionately pioneered by black women. These are not two different movements; they are profoundly connected. If you are going to continue racism, you have to control reproduction. And that means controlling women. A group called Feminist.com made these baby bead bracelets. On one, they spell "Imagine," and on the other, they asked us to write what we want. I went with "Imagine" and "We are linked, not ranked."

RBG: It's a facet of the gay rights movement that people don't think about enough. Why suddenly marriage equality? Because it wasn't until 1981 that the court struck down Louisiana's "head and master rule," that the husband was head and master of the house. Marriage was a relationship between the dominant, breadwinning husband and the subordinate, child-rearing wife. What lesbian or gay man would want that?

GS: Exactly. Marriage had to change before it could apply to more equal relationships.

PG: What made you enter an institution like that?

RBG: Marty was an extraordinary man. He was so secure in himself that he never regarded me as any kind of threat. He was my biggest booster.

PG: And a brilliant tax lawyer.

RBG: We decided when we met — I was 17, he was 18 — that we were going to be together, whether it was in medicine ——

PG: Wait! You decided that you would go into the same profession?

RBG: Right. But Marty had a consuming interest in golf and played on the Cornell golf team. So medicine was out because chemistry labs were in the afternoon. For some reason, he wanted to go to Harvard, and the business school wasn't taking women. So that left law.

Gloria Steinem, a founder of Ms. magazine, became the public face of the women's movement.

'I assumed I had to get married. Everybody did. If you didn't, you were crazy. But I kept putting it off: "I'm going to do it, but not right now." Until I was in my late 30s and the women's movement came along, and I realized: I'm happy.' - Gloria Steinem Credit Hilary Swift for The New York Times

GS: It's such an important point for young people, who often think life has to be all planned out. It's not that way.

PG: Did you decide marriage wasn't for you?

GS: Absolutely not. I assumed I had to get married. Everybody did. If you didn't, you were crazy. But I kept putting it off: "I'm going to do it, but not right now." Until I was in my late 30s

and the women's movement came along, and I realized: I'm happy. Not everyone has to live the same way.

RBG: I just read Anne-Marie Slaughter's book. She talked about "we don't have it all." Who does? I've had it all in the course of my life, but at different times.

GS: And the implication for women having it all is doing it all. But you can't. We're still far away from the idea of truly shared parenting.

Gloria Steinem talking to Senator George McGovern at the Women's National Political Caucus in Miami Beach in 1972. As a journalist, Ms. Steinem went undercover at a Playboy Club to observe the treatment of women there. Credit George Tames/The New York Times

PG: One of the cleverest things you did as a litigator was demonstrate how rigid gender roles harm men as much as women.

RBG: There was an interesting case this court decided in the first year Justice O'Connor was on the bench, about a man who wanted to go to the best nursing school in his area, but it was women-only. You could read between the lines what she understood: There was no better way to raise pay for women in nursing than to get men to do it.

GS: Equal pay for women would be the biggest economic stimulus this country could ever have. Big-time profits are being made from gender roles as they exist. It would also be win-win because female-headed households are where children are most likely to be poor.

PG: Last subject: You are both bridge builders. Justice Ginsburg on the court; and Gloria, with a sea of men and women over the years. Any advice for getting along with people who disagree with us to the core — like Justice Scalia?

RBG: Last night, my daughter and I got a prize from a women's intellectual property group, and Nino [Scalia] was in the video, saying his nice things about me. He's a very funny man. We both love opera. And we care about writing. His style is spicy, but we care about how we say it.

GS: I think Ruth is better at getting along with people with whom we profoundly disagree. I feel invisible in their presence because I'm being treated as invisible. But what we want in the future will only happen if we do it every day. So, kindness matters enormously. And empathy. Finding some point of connection.

RBG: Sometimes not listening helps, too. Do you know about this opera "Scalia/Ginsburg" by a talented musician who went to law school? Scalia's opening aria is: "The Justices are blind. How can they possibly spout this? The Constitution says nothing about this." And I answer: "You are searching in vain for a bright-line solution for a problem that isn't so easy to solve. But the beautiful thing about our Constitution is that, like our society, it can evolve." Then she goes into a jazzy part. Let it grow.