



Career Planning



## **Life's Work: An Interview with Ketanji Brown Jackson**

The first Black woman to sit on the Supreme Court talks about her disciplined journey to get there. **by Alison Beard**

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**Born six years after the U.S. Civil Rights Act** hastened desegregation, Brown became a debate champion and class president at her mostly white high school. In her college applications she declared her intention to be the first Black female Supreme Court Justice. After earning undergraduate and law degrees from Harvard and then working for nearly three decades as a lawyer and a judge, in 2022 she made good on that goal. Her new memoir is called *[Lovely One](#)*.

**HBR: From segregation to the Supreme Court in one generation is a big leap. I know you benefited from the broader U.S. civil rights movement, but how did your family's approach to education and work hasten that progress?**

**Jackson:** Their experience in the segregated South—being Black people who were actually physically separated from the broader community—made my parents really interested in having me participate. So if there were swimming lessons, my mother put me in them. If I could give a speech or say a poem at the youth fair, she wanted me to do it. The mentality was: *Here's a chance for our daughter to do everything we couldn't do, and we're going to prepare her for this world of opportunity.* My family also focused on education. My grandparents didn't have much themselves, but they understood that it was the key to success, so they worked to put their children through college, and then my parents became educators. These ideas of self-determination, self-confidence, and the ability to do what you want to, now that you are no longer held back, motivated them to set high expectations for me and encourage me to achieve them.

**You've said that as one of only a few Black students at your high school, you felt "conspicuous." Did that help or hurt you?**

A little of both. It probably helped more than hurt because I was memorable. Going into these classrooms or debate tournaments as one of a handful of students of color, with an unusual name, and then also knocking it out of the park after a lot of hard work meant that people remembered me. It did take fortitude to not feel daunted by being different. But I just decided that I would put all my effort into being as good as I could be in those realms. When you're different, you can either shrink from it and try to make yourself small or say, "I'm going to use this to my advantage."

**You write a lot about defying expectations, but many women and people of color say that those who do that can get pushback. So how did you defy in a way that didn't make people defensive?**

I've never thought about it in those terms. Maybe part of it is that in the early 1970s and through the mid '80s our society, having just turned the corner from an era of segregation, was interested in responding to those prior circumstances. Not only did my parents want to make sure that I had opportunities and was taking full advantage of them but my community was also very open to inclusion and encouragement. Most people I came into contact with growing up genuinely wanted me to succeed, so I don't recall encountering any sort of direct pushback.

**Your favorite extracurricular was debate, but you focused on the dramatic performance categories and you later starred in musicals at Harvard and aspired to Broadway. Why did you choose law over the arts?**

My father went back to law school when I was little, so the seeds of that being a career goal or track were planted very early. I thought the law was fascinating and consequential. And as much as I loved the arts, I always really wanted to do work that I thought would have a direct impact on society. I was also good at writing. So I saw the legal profession as a way to combine my skills, interests, and desire to make a difference, and I thought I could channel whatever talents I'd developed as a speaker and a performer into it.

**As you entered Harvard Law and then your career, how did it feel to again be one of a few Black women in those white-male-dominated environments?**

It wasn't easy. But in college I had formed a community with some Black women who became my good friends, and we all ended up going to the law school too. Having a close-knit group during that difficult training together was a comfort. By that time I was also in a serious relationship with my then boyfriend, now husband, and I had his support. I fell back on the skills for coping and survival that I had developed early on. Of course, as a young lawyer, I sometimes felt as though my contributions

to meetings and discussions were not taken as seriously as some of my colleagues', but I managed.

**When you saw that kind of unfairness or bias, how did you respond?**

In my view, you have to pick and choose your battles. It's not that you don't see or know that these things are happening. The question is, how much time and energy do you have to invest in responding to this particular circumstance? It may be worth it. But it may also be the case that recognizing the unfairness, which happens at all kinds of levels and in all kinds of ways in the workplace, will be taking you away from the task at hand in a way that won't be beneficial. So you have to assess—"I see that, I know that, and I'm going to choose to set it aside right now because I have more important things to worry about or to focus on"—versus responding every time. The way in which my parents navigated the world was very instructive for me. People who had lived through the society they did could have been devoured by a rage that would have made it impossible for them to proceed. Instead they turned, and pivoted, and did what they needed to do, and that made all the difference in my life.

**After law school you moved on to clerkships, including one at the Supreme Court, which took a lot of stamina. How did you manage that early part of your career?**

It was hard, but I expected it to be. The Supreme Court clerkship was literally a 24/7 kind of job. But I kept saying to myself, *You can do anything for a year*. And cases come to the Supreme Court because they are difficult and extremely consequential—addressing issues that affect an enormous number of people in very significant ways— so our baseline is that the work will be very challenging and the spotlight of public attention will be very, very hot. All that creates pressure, which you then have to balance with self-care. But your commitment is to do your best to serve your justice and the institution, and it's going to take pretty much everything you have for that period.

**Your stint in corporate law was uncomfortable. Why?**

I was pregnant when I entered it, and the uncomfortable thing was being thrust immediately into wanting to perform at the highest level as a new employee in this environment but at times feeling as though I wouldn't be able to do that once my daughter was born. Someone had to get home to relieve the nanny, and my husband was a surgical resident at Mass General at the time, so more often than not, that person was me. It was an identity crisis. I had built my professional brand around being a hard worker, staying however long, doing whatever was necessary, and not being able to do that was very, very challenging. I also felt inadequate in the parenting realm because I had to go to work and wasn't there for my baby.

**How did you resolve that conflict?**

I ended up shifting from the big law firm and trying different things. I went to a small mediation firm. I went to the government. When my kids were a bit older, I went back into big law, but ultimately got on the Sentencing Commission, an agency of the judiciary that helps set sentencing policy for federal judges. The schedule was much better. Doing work that I considered to be meaningful was also helpful. When I felt like I was really making a difference, the sacrifices on the motherhood front felt more worth it.

**How have you and your husband managed the push and pull of two high-powered careers?**

My husband has always seen this as a partnership. He is so self-sacrificing in parenting, caring for our household and my career. Early on, when we were first married, before we had kids, we would take turns. He took some time off in the residency to do research in DC so that I could work at the law firm I wanted. Then I went back up to Boston so that he could finish his residency. One of us would step back to let the other do what was needed for work. And that's the way we have managed our lives ever since. Now, during the Supreme Court term,



when I am focused on that, my husband steps up and does much more of the housework, setting up dinners, picking up the girls, et cetera. When he has busy times with his practice, I try to step forward.

**You hesitated to apply for a federal judgeship. What was holding you back, and how did you move past it?**

A lot of complicated factors were swirling. One was our home. When I said to my dad, “I might have this opportunity, but we just found this house, and we love it and don’t want to move,” he said, “What are you talking about?” Because I had always wanted to be a federal judge, and it was just a house. Aside from that, I was nervous because I had been an appellate lawyer in practice, so my expertise was not in trial work, which was the judgeship I had the opportunity to apply for. So would I even get it? If I got it, could I do it? I knew it would be a steep learning curve, and the girls were still little, so did I have the time? Would I be good enough to do the job in the way that I had come to expect of myself? Ultimately I made what I now think could be considered the right decision, but I did hesitate. I had found a comfortable life in the place I wanted to be and was happy with it. The question was whether I should just stay where I was or stretch and move to this more uncertain terrain.

**Given rising political polarization and the balance of power on the Supreme Court after President Trump’s appointments of three justices, did you ever think twice about wanting that nomination?**

Not about seeing it as an amazing opportunity despite the balance of the Court or the challenges that would most certainly arise in our current political environment. I also felt well prepared to do the job, having served at the two prior federal levels and been a Supreme Court clerk. This was, in a way, my wheelhouse in terms of skills and preparation. The scariest part was suddenly being thrust into the limelight and the confirmation process.

**How did you handle the scrutiny, particularly during those contentious confirmation hearings?**

I tried to prepare my family to make sure we understood what was coming and were ready. Of course, being a mom, if my girls had said, “We don’t want to be put through that,” then I would not have gone for it. But they were very supportive. And the White House was very helpful. There’s vetting to pick people who can withstand that kind of pressure. And if nominated, you’re put through intense questioning to practice how to respond in a way that is most informative and not emotional and to not take it personally. The advice was: “You can either be upset or you can be a Supreme Court Justice.” That’s the work.

**What are your views on the current debates over lifetime federal judicial appointments and a Supreme Court ethics code?**

I’m not going to comment on political issues currently being evaluated. But I am optimistic in that the debate is emblematic of democratic engagement, which is positive. We have people who are focused on, thinking about, and talking about this. As a branch of government, we answer to the people. As judges, we are public servants. And it is up to the people to determine what the structure and form and function of the courts should be. As for the ethics code, it’s an interesting topic that has recently come to the fore, and the Court has now adopted its own code, which is generally modeled on what the lower courts do.

**How do you and the other justices engage as colleagues? What do you do to make sure it feels like a good workplace, even when you’re disagreeing on big issues?**

Well, a part of the Court’s tradition is having lunch together. Pretty much every day the Court is sitting, which is a lot during the term, and any day that we have a conference or a meeting where we discuss cases, it’s bring-your-own to the justices’ dining room. That really does help with collegiality.



**You clerked for judges with different management styles. You described one as a master nurturer, another as meticulous and scholarly. What kind of leader are you?**

I try to draw from both sets of qualities. I am very warm and open with my staff. I have a small group that works directly for me, my law clerks and my assistants, and we do fun things together. I try to be a nurturer in that sense. But I also ensure that we are doing the work necessary to lay out my opinions in a clear and thorough fashion. I have pretty high expectations for the drafts that we generate, and I'm a very substantial editor of the opinions coming out of my chambers. I work very, very hard to prepare for arguments, to ask questions that I think will be meaningful in helping understand the issues and shape the debate. So I do think that I exhibit a number of qualities of my former bosses—hopefully the best qualities. But you'd have to ask my staff what they think!

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