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t the Phoenix Federal Court Building on First Avenue, the security guards actively checked bags and tested pagers, as they do every day. But on this August day an extra officer and a U.S. marshal kept watch as the clock ticked closer to 10:00 a.m. They awaited the arrival of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, who was back home again for another visit to the land she loves. This trip had special meaning. She came to see, for the first time, the new federal court building that will bear her name.

United States District Court Presiding Judge Stephen McNamee and U.S. District Court Judge Robert Broomfield were there to be the official greeters and tour guides for the morning. Justice O'Connor and her husband John O'Connor, a partner at the Phoenix law firm Bryan Cave, arrived right on schedule. Looking relaxed, Justice O'Connor walked energetically into the building to greet everyone. A tan face, warm smile and stylish pink suit softened her strong presence.

After a minute or two of greetings, it was clear Justice O'Connor was on a mission. She expressed a sense of excitement about seeing the new court building. So the group quickly loaded into a van for the six-block ride.

At this time, the courthouse was still two-and-a-half months away from scheduled completion. There was a lot of work left to be done, but the top of the huge glass building was

clearly visible from a couple of blocks away. As the van turned the corner, the entire structure became visible for the first time and Justice O'Connor grew excited. "Look at it!" she said, noting that it filled an entire square block. "It's massive. I had no idea. I'm just dying to see everything."

Justice O'Connor saw it all. Flanked by the judges, her husband and U.S. District Court architect Ross Bern, Justice O'Connor didn't hesitate as she crossed a dirt parking lot, navigating her way through discarded nails, a few two-by-fours, and the construction crew's old drinking cups. With a hard-hat hugging her styled hair, the Justice stepped inside and then paused for a moment as she gazed up at the six-story glass atrium, which was glowing with diffused sunlight.

It was fairly warm in parts of the building, because the special cooling system had not yet been activated. Justice O'Connor asked several questions about the cooling methods and how this glass building would stay comfortable during scorching Phoenix

summers. The entire group was soon perspiring, but that didn't stop Justice O'Connor from walking up and down several flights of stairs during the one-hour tour.

During the walk-through she paid great attention to detail. She looked, she touched and she asked many questions. She quizzed Judge Broomfield about the type of technology that would be used in the courtrooms, checked out the office space for judges and support staff, admired the blinds on the windows and marveled at the view of the state capitol dome from one of the offices.


That's the inquisitive Sandra Day O'Connor that Arizona Supreme Court Justice Ruth McGregor knows so well. "She's so bright and so curious," notes Justice McGregor. "She loves to travel and she always comes back knowing so much about where she went. She never stops asking questions and getting information."

Justice McGregor is passionate in her praise of Justice O'Connor. She clerked for Justice O'Connor at the U.S. Supreme Court from 1981 to 1982. It was the start of a rewarding

Dane Penland/Collection of the Supreme Court of the United States.

Most Grac

By Matt Silverman

A portrait of Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, an older woman with short, wavy, light-colored hair, smiling slightly. She is wearing a dark, long-sleeved top and a gold necklace. Her hands are clasped in front of her. The background is a dark wood-paneled wall with a window on the right. The lighting is soft, highlighting her face.

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– Justice Ruth McGregor

● Insights into Justice Sandra Day O'Connor

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Justice O'Connor, John O'Connor, Judge McNamee and Judge Broomfield tour the court building during construction in August.

relationship. “Anybody who spends a year with Sandra Day O’Connor learns a lot,” says Justice McGregor. “She has unbelievable organizational skills. I’ve never in my life known anyone who is as capable as she is in compressing so many things in one day and doing them all well.”

Justice McGregor describes Justice O’Connor as a mentor and role model in every sense of these words. “She meets with her clerks on a weekly basis to talk about the upcoming cases and to give the clerks a chance to express themselves. Think of how intimidating that could be, coming into the chambers and being asked your opinion of issues. It’s part of her openness to listen and consider what those of us, with far less experience, had to say about a case.”

Justice O’Connor’s hands-on style helps develop confidence, Justice McGregor remembers. “She gave us the feeling that what we said was important for her to hear and that she took our thoughts seriously. She was able to not agree with our approach, but we never felt personally put down in any way.”

Justice O’Connor’s graciousness and down-to-earth manner are men-

tioned often by those who know and work with her. Judge Eino Jacobson served side by side with Sandra Day O’Connor on the Arizona Court of Appeals from 1979 to 1981. “She’s not a false person,” says Judge Jacobson. “She’s her own person. A true lady of the West. She grew up on a ranch in Greenlee County. She’s a product of that environment. I suspect she’d like to be known as an honest, hard-working, Western judge.”

Judge Jacobson was there when that Western judge suddenly vaulted into the national limelight. It was 1981 when President Ronald Reagan considered her for an appointment to the U.S. Supreme court. She was the first woman ever nominated.

“It was a madhouse. No one east of the Mississippi had ever heard of Sandra Day O’Connor,” Judge Jacobson remembers. “The media descended on the court of appeals. Cameramen walked into the halls of the court building, taking pictures. We all got phone calls from reporters concerning

Chief Justice Warren E. Burger swearing in the new Associate Justice, Sandra Day O’Connor in the Supreme Court Building as her husband John O’ Connor, holds the Bible on September 25, 1981.

her abilities. And through it all she handled it like she handled all the matters in her affairs. She’s a class act.”

Now, 19 years later, Justice O’Connor ranks third in seniority on the high court. As the first female Supreme Court Justice, she probably has been scrutinized more than many of the other justices. Those close to her say she is very bright, thoughtful and independent.

“Sandra doesn’t have agendas,” Judge Jacobson says. “She makes decisions based on what she thinks the law is and what the facts are. She doesn’t skew that to encompass preordained agendas that are politically popular. She calls them the ways she sees them.”

In addition to her decision-making abilities, many say it’s Justice O’Connor’s personal style that sets her apart. “She is always so gracious, so attentive and just so warm toward people,” Justice McGregor says. “She’s a wonderful role model in that way. She exemplifies the notion that a person, a woman, can be professional and strong without being strident. She is able to be sure of herself without being arrogant or condescending.”

That confident and courteous



Below: Michael Evans/Collection of the Supreme Court of the United States. Above left: Laura Devany

Justice O’Connor’s Career

1952 - 1953	1954-1957	1958 - 1960	1965 - 1969	1969 - 1975	1972	1975 - 1979	1979 - 1981	1981 - present
Deputy County Attorney, San Mateo County, CA	Civilian Attorney for Quartermaster Market Center, Germany	Private Practice, Maryvale, Arizona	Assistant Attorney General of Arizona	State Senator, Arizona	Senate Majority Leader	Maricopa County Superior Court Judge	Arizona Court of Appeals Judge	Associate Justice, U.S. Supreme Court

has meant as much to the

– Justice Ruth McGregor.

attitude came through during Justice O'Connor's tour of the new court building. Before getting ready to pose for a professional photographer, she asked to look in the lens so she could see the background.

"I'd like to change the shot," she said, and then guided the photographer to an area she thought better highlighted the building.

And when asked about having the structure named in her honor, a humble Justice O'Connor chose to focus more on the achievements of the architects.

"It is perhaps the most unusual and dramatic new federal court building in the United States," Justice O'Connor said. "Arizona has always provided dramatic examples of interesting architecture. This new federal courthouse in Phoenix is a remarkable piece of modern architecture. The enormous open space in the atrium and the interesting use of evaporative cooling for the space is a splendid way to showcase Arizona's adaptation of urban living in a hot climate."

On October 23, that building will officially be dedicated to Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, who grew up on a dusty Arizona ranch with no running water.

It's quite a monument to the woman who initially couldn't get a job as a lawyer, because those who were hiring offered her jobs as a legal secretary.

The dedication in her name is a fitting tribute, Justice McGregor says, to a true Arizona legend. "There's probably been, in this century, no person who has meant as much to the people within Arizona's legal system as Justice O'Connor. It was important

for the court as an institution to become more inclusive. It was unbelievably important to have a woman appointed to the court. And the fact that the person who did that was from Arizona indicates to me that choosing to name the federal courthouse for her is perfect recognition."

Back inside the courthouse, the tour was winding down. Everyone was a bit damp and dusty as they slowly headed back to the van. Justice O'Connor left smiling, looking forward to returning for the dedication ceremony. "I am thrilled," she said, "to have this amazing building bear my name." 