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Justice, with an accent

Joe Ferullo | Jul. 16, 2009 NCR Today

The Senate hearings for Supreme Court nominee Sonia Sotomayor have covered the gamut of public imperatives, everything from abortion to gun control and the First Amendment.

But, honestly, I can't focus on any of those things. All I can hear is her accent.

It's just like mine ? or, really, just like my cousin Joanna's. If I close my eyes, it is Joanna I hear talking about matters of grave constitutional import. Her or a whole group of people I grew up with in the same part of New York that Sotomayor calls home: The Bronx.

To my ear, there are three levels of Bronx/Brooklyn ethnic accent: 1) the harsh cadence of Joe Pesci and countless Martin Scorcese movies, 2) the slight accent you can't quite place of a Mario Cuomo, and 3) the Sotomayor style, somewhere in between the other two. It is clearly New York and ethnic, but it is clearly something else.

It's an accent that straddles both worlds: the speaker is educated, the pronunciations are perfect, but the hint of New York-ese reveals someone who does not want to leave his or her roots behind.

Some public figures barely reveal that heritage in their speech patterns. They speak in the universal cadence of the educated and confident. Usually, this means they went through school and entered professions at a time when ethnic accents were a sharp and certain barrier. For them, life was like "Pygmalion" -- you rose or fell on how you formed your vowels.

I remember how devastated a student was who lived across the hall from me in college at Columbia University. His professor had just ordered him to "get the Bronx out" of his voice if he hoped to ever make it as a lawyer. It was not something he thought he could do -- it felt as if he had to be a fake in order to become a "somebody."

I knew what he meant -- several times over the years, people would stop when I told them where I grew up and say, "funny, you don't sound like you're from The Bronx." My answer was always the same: my parents sent me to good schools. Inside, I felt as if they were really telling me: How nice - you don't sound dumb.

For a lot of us, there was this middle way -- the voice I hear from Sotomayor, from my cousin Joanna, a university math professor, and myself. I'm not sure it was a conscious choice -- somewhere deeper down, we made the decision. We wanted to be judged not by our accents, but by our accomplishments. And yet we needed to remain true to the ethnic background that formed us, and gave us the tools to aim high.

So my Bronx accent -- diminished by years at high school and college -- is still there. It really blooms when I'm tired, angry or talking with family (often all at the same time). And other New Yorkers pick up on it quickly: "Is that a trace of The Bronx?" someone said to me over the phone just the other day, before revealing she grew up in Brooklyn herself.

As the Senate proceedings continue, the grand hearing room is filled with everything from lilting measures of the South to the flat declarations of Minnesota. But there is one voice that is a soft reminder of home -- and it may belong to the next justice of the Supreme Court.

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