

Pressure, Pain and Pride of Being the First



Celebrating a historic first

We celebrate the confirmation of Ketanji Brown Jackson as the first Black woman on the United States Supreme Court, but we also must pay tribute to all whose painful journeys mirror what we witnessed during her Senate confirmation hearing as she shattered the glass ceiling. As Justice Brown Jackson joins another groundbreaker, Justice Sonia Sotomayor, a Latina and the first woman of color on the high court, we must acknowledge the slow progress and enormous pressure of being first. We also must express great pride in the strides

made toward building a Supreme Court that more closely represents “We the People.”

What does it take to be first?

Oprah Winfrey says it takes “working twice as hard, but getting half the credit and half the pay.” It takes emotional intelligence not to allow the constant insults and demonstrative prejudices to reduce you to a single identity or symbol. It takes engaging in the system as it is with a clear goal of using your power, position, and influence to make it what it should be. It takes anticipating loneliness, yet leveraging the spirit of those who paved the way to let you know you are never alone. It takes staring straight in the face of hypocrisy and never shifting your gaze from the ultimate goal. It takes knowing you are justified, qualified, fortified and dignified for the position. It takes a coalition of people who do not always share your identities to stand in the face of racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and ignorance to champion the rights of all. Finally, it takes knowing that you were called to this opportunity, not for yourself, but for all who will come after you.

As we bask in this proud moment, let us not forget the pain and pressure of being first. Recognizing the hoops, hurdles, barriers, and the land mines that other “firsts” have endured, makes their ascension even grander.

Therefore, it is imperative that we support those who have succeeded, represented us well, made the sacrifice, and joined the ranks of the first.

Here are some of them:

- [Halle Berry](#), the only Black female to win an Academy Award for Best Actress.
- [Hidilyn Diaz](#), the Philippines' first-ever Olympic gold medalist, winning the women's 55-kilogram weightlifting competition at Tokyo in 2020.
- [Hwang Dong-hyuk](#), a South Korean man who created, wrote, and directed Netflix's most-watched content of all time, “Squid Game.”
- [Diane Humetewa \(Hopi\)](#), first Native American woman to become a U.S. [federal judge](#).
- [Victoria Kolakowski](#), the first openly transgender person to serve as judge in California, for Alameda County Superior Court.
- [Thurgood Marshall](#), the first African American associate justice of the [U.S. Supreme Court](#), serving 1967-1991.
- [Harvey Milk](#), the first openly gay male elected to public office in California, as a member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1977.
- [Patsy Mink](#), the first woman of color elected to the U.S. House of Representatives and the first Asian American woman to serve in Congress representing Hawaii. She co-authored the Title IX Amendment of the Higher Education Act, later renamed the Patsy T. Mink Equal Opportunity in Education Act in 2002.
- [Wataru Misaka](#), the first person of color and Japanese American to play in the NBA, during the 1947-48 season when it was known as the Basketball Association of America.
- [Alyssa Nakken](#), a [Sacramento State alumna](#), and the first full-time female coach in Major League Baseball. Also the first female to coach on the field during a major league game. #MadeAtSacState.
- [Baraka Obama](#), the first African American president of the United States.
- [Michelle Obama](#), the first African American first lady.
- [Sandra Day O'Connor](#), the first female associate justice of the [U.S. Supreme Court](#), serving 1981-2006.
- [Michael Sam](#), the first openly gay player to be drafted into the NFL, by the St. Louis Rams in 2014.
- [Sonia Sotomayor](#), a Latina and first woman of color on the [U.S. Supreme Court](#).
- [Chang-Lin Tien](#), first Asian American to lead a major research university in the U.S., as chancellor of [UC Berkeley](#).

In partnership,

Dr. Mia Settles-Tidwell,

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