

*Beginner Biography*

# Ketanji Brown Jackson

From “Most Likely to Succeed” to the Supreme Court



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From “Most Likely to Succeed” to the Supreme Court



by Jennifer Marino Walters  
illustrated by Niall Harding

**LOOK!**  
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Red Chair Press    Egremont, Massachusetts

**Look! Books** are produced and published by Red Chair Press:  
Red Chair Press LLC PO Box 333 South Egremont, MA 01258-0333  
www.redchairpress.com



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### **Publisher's Cataloging-In-Publication Data**

(Provided by Cassidy Cataloguing Services, Inc.)

Names: Marino Walters, Jennifer, author. | Harding, Niall, illustrator.

Title: Ketanji Brown Jackson : from "Most Likely to Succeed" to the Supreme Court / by Jennifer Marino Walters ; illustrated by Niall Harding.

Other titles: Look! books (Red Chair Press). Beginner biography

Description: Egremont, Massachusetts : Red Chair Press, [2024] | Includes index.

| Interest age level: 006-009. | Summary: Born in Washington, DC, in 1970, and raised in Miami, Florida, Ketanji Brown Jackson developed an interest in law and politics at an early age. While in grade school, she sat with her father and watched him complete his law school assignments. And though some people, including a school guidance counselor, discouraged Ketanji from aiming high, she proved them wrong and graduated with honors from Harvard Law School after being named in high school as Most Likely to Succeed. She went on to serve on the U.S. District Court and the United States Court of Appeals before making history and becoming the first Black woman to be confirmed to the United States Supreme Court in 2022.--Publisher.

Identifiers: ISBN: 9781643713670 (library hardcover) | 9781643713687 (paperback)  
| 9781643713694 (multiuser ebook) | LCCN: 2023935432

Subjects: LCSH: Jackson, Ketanji Brown, 1970---Juvenile literature. | United States. Supreme Court-- Officials and employees--Biography--Juvenile literature. | African American women judges-- Biography--Juvenile literature. | CYAC: Jackson, Ketanji Brown, 1970- | United States. Supreme Court--Officials and employees--Biography. | African American women judges-- Biography. | LCGFT: Biographies. | BISAC: JUVENILE NONFICTION / Biography & Autobiography / Women. | JUVENILE NONFICTION / Biography & Autobiography / Political. | JUVENILE NONFICTION / Biography & Autobiography / Cultural, Ethnic & Regional.

Classification: LCC: KF8745.J25 W35 2024 | DDC: 347.732634--dc23

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**Photo credits:** Fred Schilling, Collection of the Supreme Court of the United States

Printed in the United States of America

0324 1P CGF24

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# Lovely One

Ketanji Onyika Brown was born on September 14, 1970 in Washington, D.C. Ketanji (keh-THAN-jee) means “lovely one” in Swahili, an African language. Her parents—both schoolteachers—wanted their daughter’s name to represent their African **ancestry**.



Ketanji's parents grew up during a time when Black people did not have the same rights as white people. There were laws that required Blacks and whites to be segregated (separated) in schools and in many public places. Those laws were removed by the end of the 1960s.

# A Bright Future

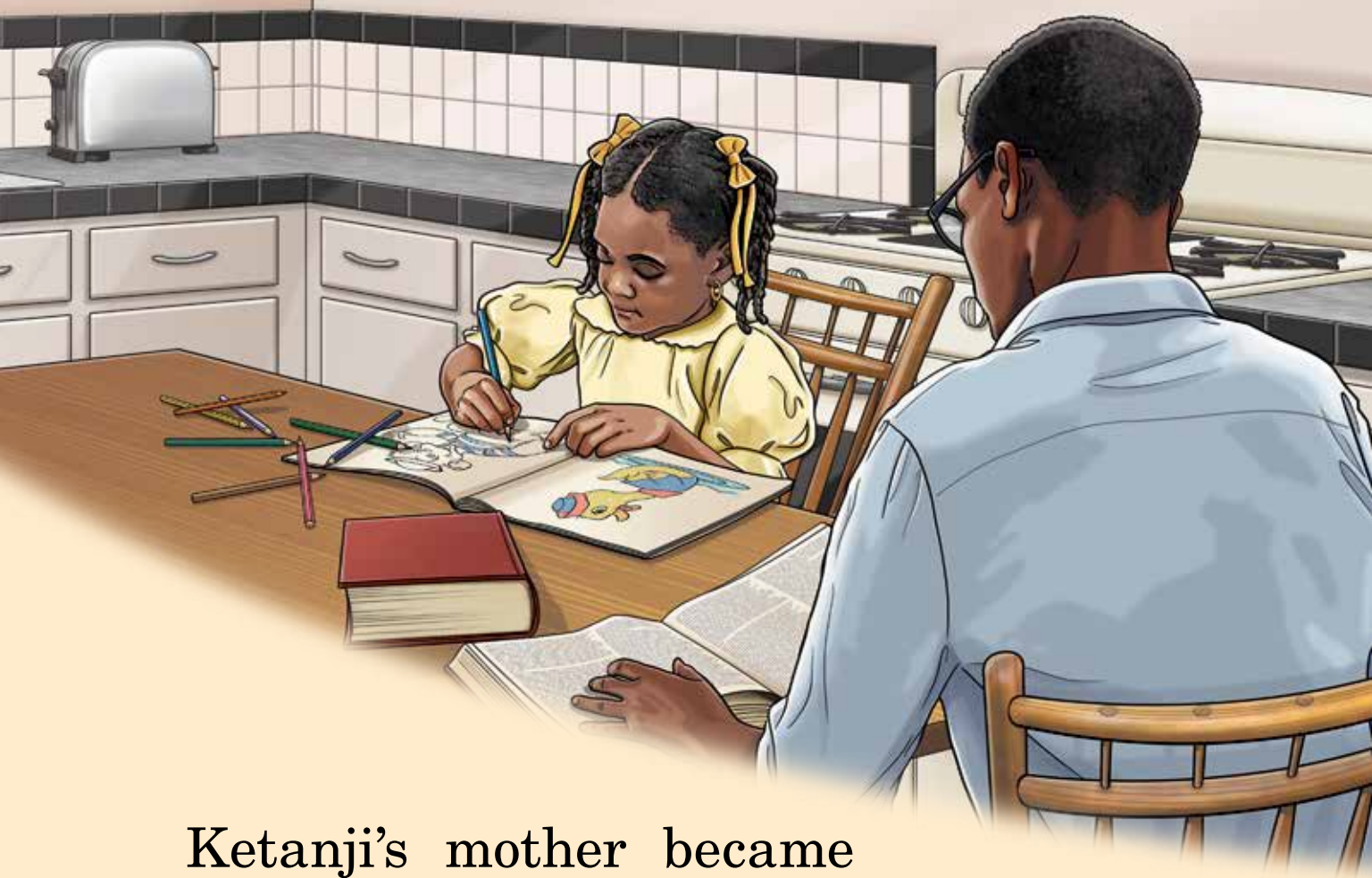
When Ketanji was 4 years old, the family moved to Miami, Florida so her father could attend law school. Little Ketanji loved to sit with her dad and color in her coloring books while he read his law books. That was when she first became interested in law.

## In Ketanji's Words

“My parents... taught me hard work. They taught me **perseverance**. They taught me that anything is possible in this great country.”

—Ketanji to Senator Cory Booker in 2022





Ketanji's mother became a high school principal. Ketanji's parents taught her that she could do anything, no matter the color of her skin.



# Star Student

When Ketanji started school, she worked hard and got very good grades. In middle school, she was **elected** school mayor. In high school, she was elected student-body president three times.

## Good to Know

According to her high school yearbook, Ketanji's classmates voted her "most talented" and "most likely to succeed."

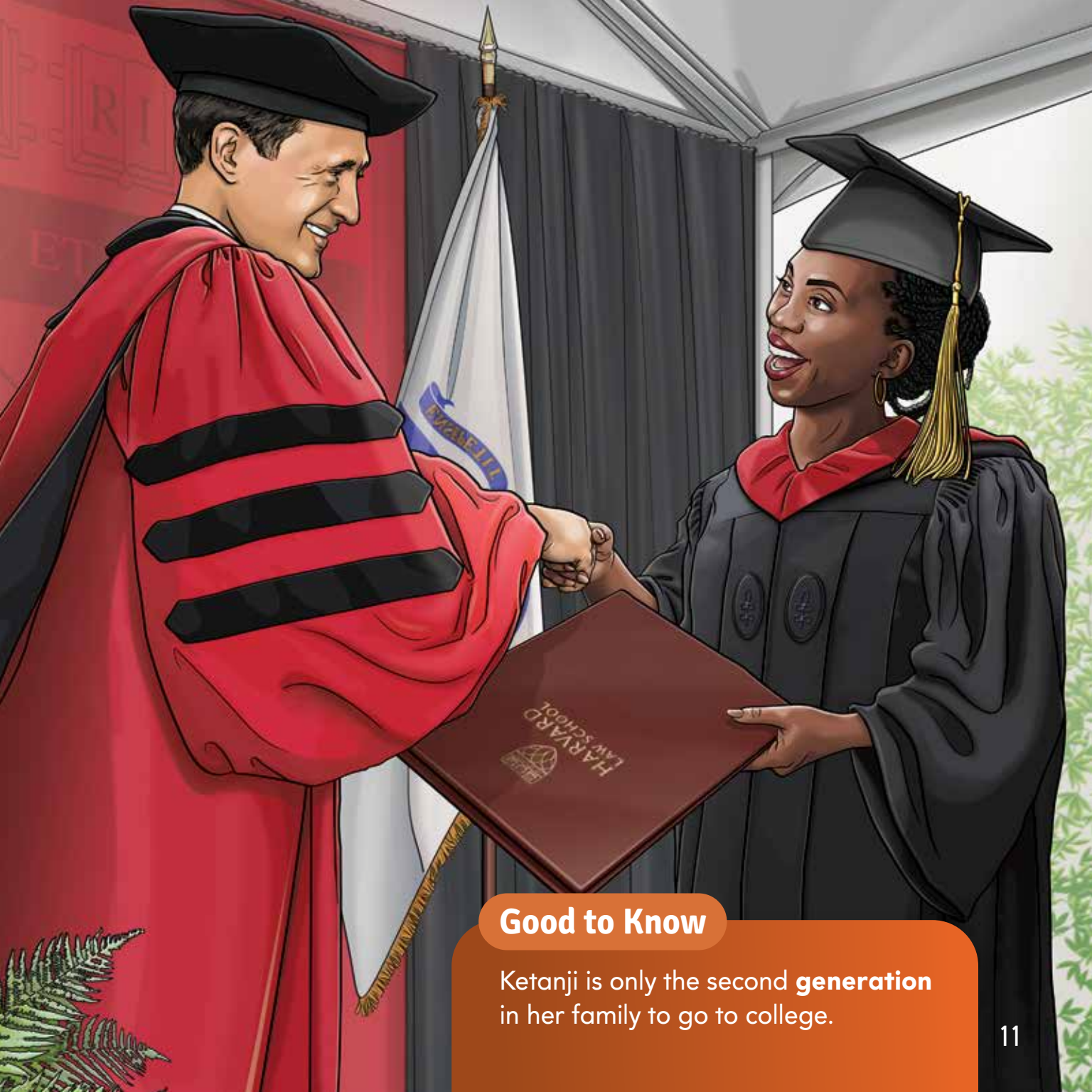


Ketanji was also a star on her high school's **debate** team. She won many competitions. One of them took place at Harvard University, one of the top schools in the country. Ketanji decided she wanted to go to college at Harvard.

Ketanji's guidance counselor told her not to aim so high. But Ketanji didn't listen. She applied to Harvard anyway—and got in.

Ketanji graduated from Harvard with honors in 1992. She then went to Harvard Law School. She graduated from there with honors in 1996.





### Good to Know

Ketanji is only the second **generation** in her family to go to college.

# A Budding Career

That's when Ketanji's law career began. She worked as a clerk (assistant) for two U.S. judges, and then for Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer. She then held several other law jobs.



From 2005 to 2007, Ketanji worked as a public defender. That meant she helped prisoners and other people accused of crimes who could not afford to pay for a lawyer.

Ketanji joined the U.S. District Court in 2012 and the U.S. Court of Appeals in 2021. They are both very important courts in the country.

# Big Nomination

In January 2022, Justice Breyer announced that he would retire from the Supreme Court that summer. President Biden thought long and hard about who he wanted to replace Justice Breyer. He decided to **nominate** Ketanji. It was a huge honor.



“I can only hope that my life and career, my love of this country and the Constitution... will inspire future generations of Americans,” Ketanji said.

In April 2022, the Senate confirmed Ketanji’s nomination.

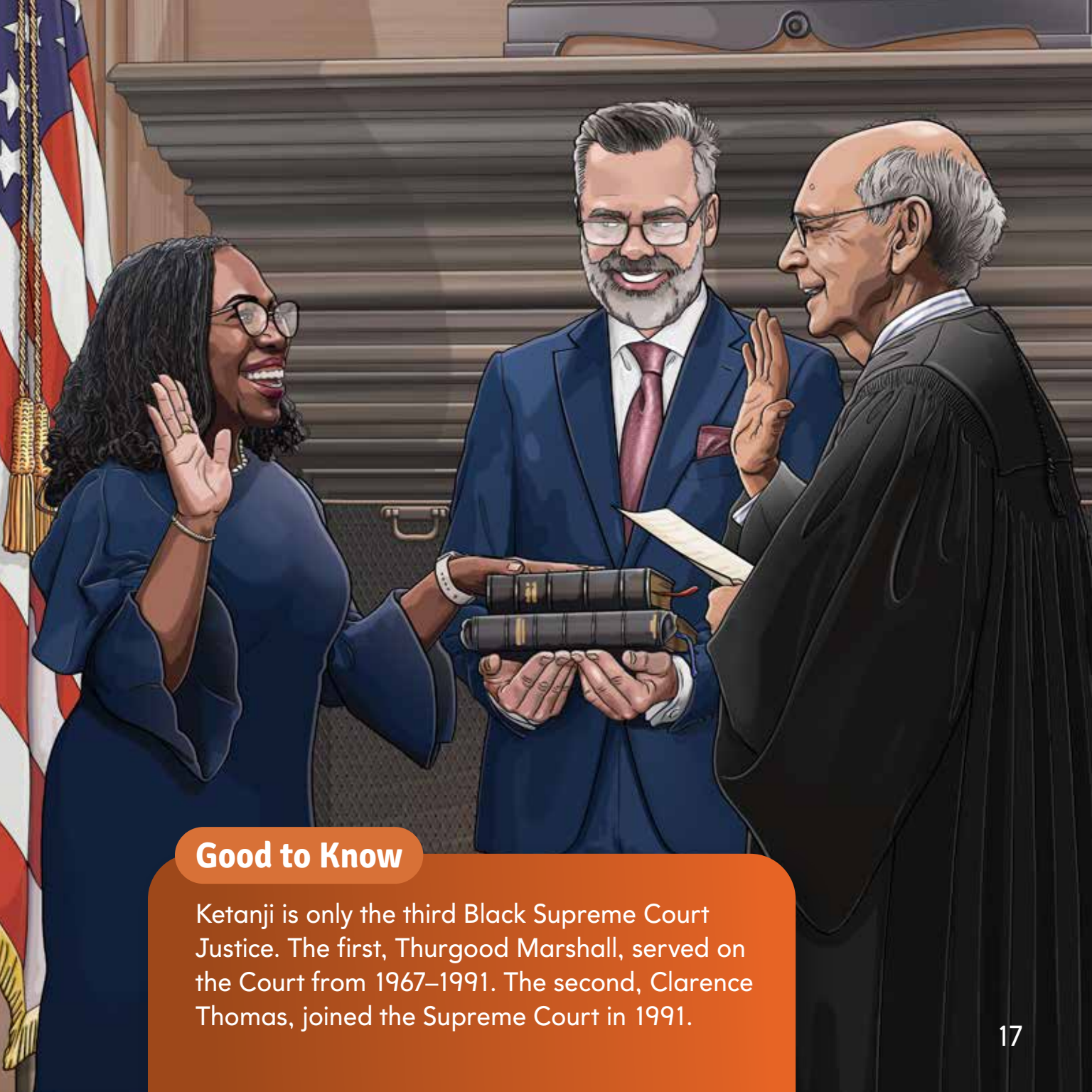
### **Good to Know**

The Supreme Court is the highest court in the United States. It is made up of nine Justices, who decide whether new laws agree with the Constitution. The Supreme Court’s decisions affect the lives of all Americans.



# Making History

Ketanji was sworn in as a U.S. Supreme Court Justice on June 30, 2022. It was a historic moment: Ketanji became the first Black woman ever to serve on the Supreme Court. She also became the first Supreme Court Justice to have ever been a public defender. And she was the first-ever Justice from the state of Florida.



### Good to Know

Ketanji is only the third Black Supreme Court Justice. The first, Thurgood Marshall, served on the Court from 1967–1991. The second, Clarence Thomas, joined the Supreme Court in 1991.

# Diversity in the Court

When Ketanji joined the Supreme Court, it also marked the first time that four women were on the Court at the same time. Ketanji joined Justices Sonia Sotomayor, Elena Kagan, and Amy Coney Barrett.

## Good to Know

Sandra Day O'Connor was the first woman to become a Supreme Court Justice. She served on the Court from 1981–2006. The second was Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who served from 1993 until her death in 2020.



And with Clarence Thomas serving on the Court, it became the first time in history that white men did not make up the **majority** of the Supreme Court.

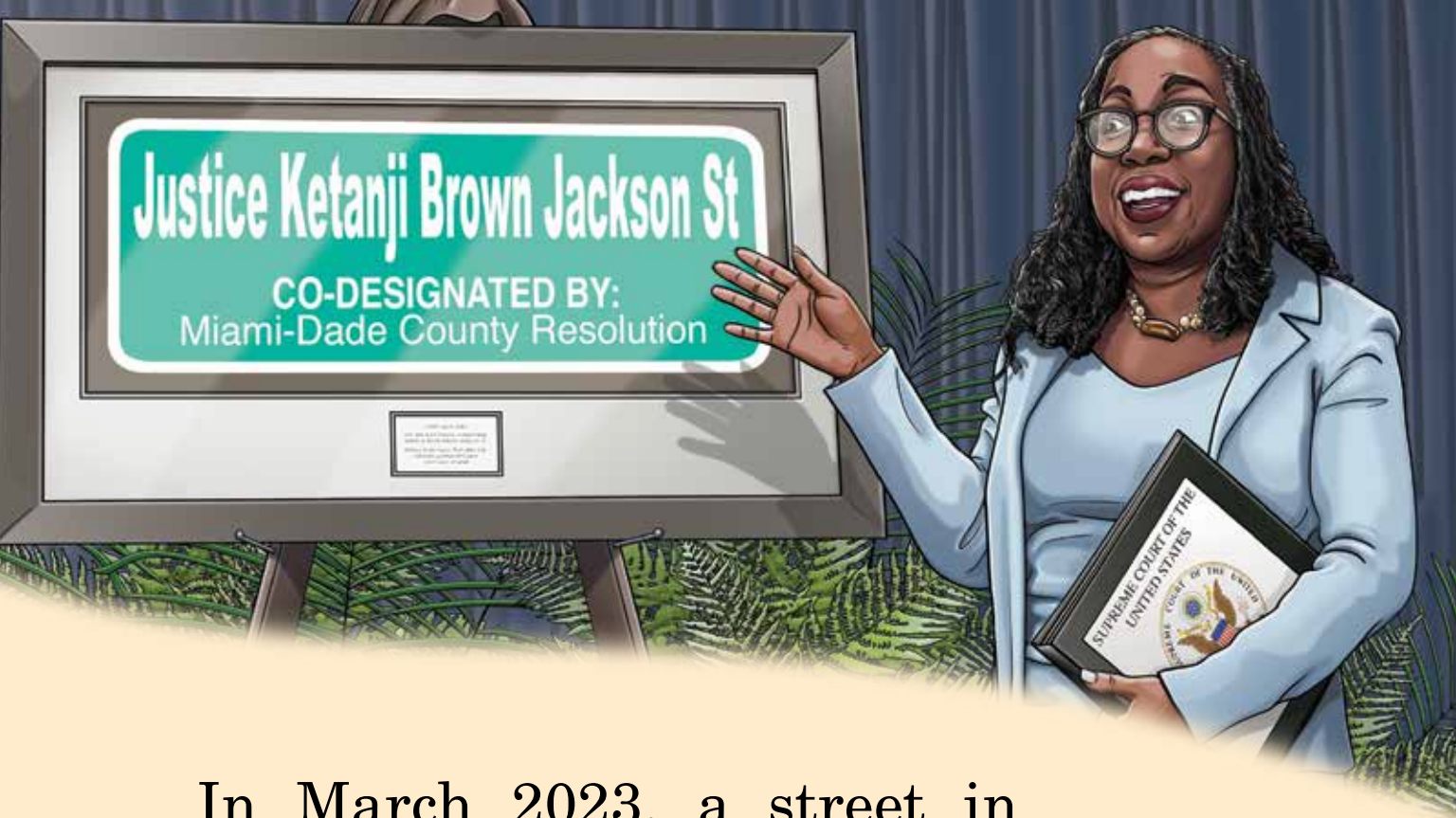
# A Role Model

As a Supreme Court Justice, Ketanji has vowed to be fair when making decisions. She remains a role model for girls, especially her daughters, Talia and Leila. They were born in 2000 and 2004.

## In Ketanji's Words

“Girls like my daughters need to learn that they have opportunities in America today; opportunities that don't exist for girls in many other countries.”

*—from a 2017 speech*



In March 2023, a street in Cutler Bay, Florida (the town near Miami where Ketanji grew up) was renamed in her honor. It is now called Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson Street.

# Timeline: Big Dates in Ketanji's Life

- 1970:** Ketanji is born in Washington, D.C.
- 1974:** Ketanji and her family move to a town near Miami, Florida, where she grows up.
- 1992:** She graduates with honors from Harvard University.
- 1996:** Ketanji graduates with honors from Harvard Law School and marries Patrick Jackson.



## February

- 2022:** President Joe Biden nominates Ketanji to the U.S. Supreme Court.

## April

- 2022:** The U.S. Senate confirms Ketanji's nomination.

## June

- 2022:** Ketanji becomes the first Black woman ever to serve on the Supreme Court.
- 2023:** A street in Cutler Bay, Florida is renamed in Ketanji's honor.

## Words to Know

**ancestry:** family background

**debate:** a discussion which people give different opinions about a topic

**elected:** chosen for a job or position through voting

**generation:** the people in a family born and living during the same time

**majority:** more than half of something

**nominate:** choose as a candidate for a job or position

**perseverance:** a quality in which someone continues to try to do something even though it's very difficult

## Learn More at the Library

(Check out these books to read with others)

**Charles, Tami.** *Ketanji Brown Jackson: A Justice for All.* Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2023.

**Magoon, Kekla.** *Ketanji.* Harper Quill Tree. 2023.

**Moses, Shelia P.** *Who Is Ketanji Brown Jackson?* Penguin Workshop, 2022.

**Schwartz, Heather E.** *Ketanji Brown Jackson: First Black Woman on the U.S. Supreme Court.* Lerner Publications, 2023.



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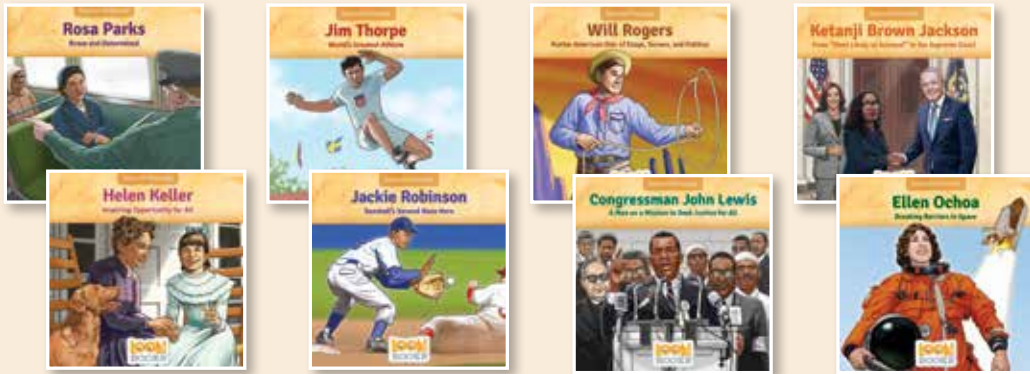
### About the Author

**Jennifer Marino Walters** lives with her twin boys and daughter in Virginia near Washington D.C. Jennifer is proud that her children have role models like Justice Jackson to inspire them to be their best.

# Beginner Biography



Born in Washington, D.C., in 1970, and raised in Miami, Florida, **Ketanji Brown Jackson** developed an interest in law at an early age. And though some people including a school guidance counselor, discouraged Ketanji from aiming high, she proved them wrong and graduated with honors from Harvard Law School after being named in high school as Most Likely to Succeed. She went on to make history by becoming the first Black woman to be confirmed to the United States Supreme Court in 2022.



Look for these other books, too—

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Ruby Bridges: A Brave Child Who Made History  
Maria Tallchief: Native America's Prima Ballerina  
Elizabeth Cady Stanton: Fighter for Womens' Rights

Cesar Chavez: Friend to Farm Workers  
Daniel Inouye: World War II Hero and Senator  
Sequoyah: Man of Many Words  
Sojourner Truth: Fighting for Freedom



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ISBN: 978-1-64371-367-0

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