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## What's in a Name? Sometimes Everything You Need to Know

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# WHAT'S IN A NAME? SOMETIMES EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW

DAVID B. WILKINS\*

I have always been fascinated by names.

Given at birth, names both look backwards to history and ahead to a hoped-for future. This is especially true of middle names, which are often specifically given to commemorate the mother's family legacy, which in our male-dominated culture is submerged in the tradition that children take their father's last name.

When I read Ralph's obituary in the *Boston Globe*, I learned that this was also true for my old friend. I knew Ralph's middle initial was "D," but in all the years we knew each other I had never bothered to ask what it stood for. So, it was only in reading his obituary that mournful morning that I discovered that the "D" stood for Dreyfus, Ralph's mother's maiden name. And like so many other things about my friend, it immediately struck me as a perfect bridge between past, present, and future.

As those of us of a certain age know, the name Dreyfus is most famously associated with Alfred Dreyfus, the Jewish French military officer falsely accused of treason at the turn of the twentieth century. "L'Affaire Dreyfus" is now widely regarded as an infamous symbol of antisemitism and injustice. Although at the time I read his obituary I had no idea whether Ralph was related to this historical figure (I have since learned that he may have been a distant relation), I immediately said to myself: how appropriate that a man who carried this name would become the first Jewish Chief Justice in the history of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, and a champion for justice for all.

Since the day that I first met Ralph in the Editor's Room at the Harvard Law Review in the fall of 1978, he has consistently been, to borrow Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s apt description, a "drum major for justice."<sup>1</sup> Throughout his storied professional career, Ralph always chose public service over private

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<sup>1</sup> "Drum Major Instinct," STAN. UNIV. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. RSCH. & EDUC. INST., <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/drum-major-instinct> [<https://perma.cc/G44B-HVL5>].

gain, putting his talents in the service of the most vulnerable and oppressed. And, as anyone who knew him even casually will attest, Ralph not only dedicated his own life to the words inscribed over that other Supreme Court in Washington, D.C.—Equal Justice Under Law—but he made sure that this passion was passed down to the next generation.

Once again, this legacy is captured in a middle name. But to understand this part of Ralph's legacy, one must first talk about a part of Ralph's life that was even more important to him than his dedication to seeking justice for all.

From our first conversation in 1978, it was immediately clear to me that Ralph was brilliant. But it was not until he married Debbie Ramirez ten years later that I knew he was also cool.

Debbie was a year behind us at Harvard Law School, and I remembered her clearly as the brilliant and beautiful firebrand who was the president of what was then called the Chicano Law Students Association. When I found out that Ralph and Debbie were getting married shortly after I returned to Boston in 1986, I realized that there must be even more to my old friend than I thought!

But after my initial surprise, I realized that the union of these two amazing people made perfect sense. Like Ralph, Debbie was also a true drum major for justice. In the years following their marriage, I watched with pride and awe as Debbie quickly established herself as a leader in the fight for accountability in policing, equality in education, and access to justice. And as Ralph and Debbie welcomed their two beautiful children Michael and Rachel into the world, they made sure that each would carry both their mother's and their father's deep commitment to justice by giving each the middle name Ramirez.

Although they are just beginning their lives and careers, both Michael Ramirez Gants and Rachel Ramirez Gants have already shown that they are worthy bearers of this dual heritage. While still in college, Michael created JustiServ, an innovative tech start-up designed to improve access to justice for the millions of low- and moderate-income individuals who cannot afford a lawyer to protect even their most basic rights. For her part, as a student at Harvard Law School, Rachel Ramirez Gants devoted hundreds of hours to the Tennant Advocacy Project protecting vulnerable populations from eviction.

Yes, the future of the Ramirez-Gants legacy is clearly in good hands.

But as I have had the privilege of watching Michael and Rachel grow from precocious and inquisitive children into accomplished young adults, I cannot help but think about one more person who shares Ralph's middle name: the actor Richard Dreyfuss. Although spelled with two "s's" instead of one, Ralph and Richard have some striking similarities.

There is, of course, their devilish good looks—although Ralph would want me to be clear that he towered over his 5-foot-5-inch acting doppelgänger! But in addition to his handsome face and rakish charm, Ralph, with his

deep seriousness of purpose and deadpan wit, also shared Richard Dreyfuss's uncanny ability to seamlessly combine drama and comedy, as displayed in films like *Jaws* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

But my favorite Richard Dreyfuss film is the one that reminds me most of Ralph: *Stand by Me*. In it, as most of you will recall, Richard Dreyfuss plays the grown up Gordie, who narrates the story of four twelve-year-old boys whose journey to find a dead body leads them to discover a depth of character and emotion in each other—and even more importantly, in themselves—that they never knew existed, and that they rarely found again.

In the last line of the movie, the grown-up Gordie writes, “I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve. Jesus, does anyone?”<sup>2</sup>

I was 22 when I met Ralph in the fall of 1978. But rarely have I had a more generous and caring friend. Ralph was the most stand-up guy you could ever meet, offering support without ever being asked.

So, I close with this.

Debbie, Michael, and Rachel, to paraphrase the words of the song sung by the great Ben E. King that played as the credits rolled at the end of *Stand by Me*:

Now that “the night has come, and the land is dark, and the moon is the only light we see.” Please, “[don’t] be afraid.” “[Don’t] be afraid.”<sup>3</sup>

For I, and every one of Ralph's legion of friends, will always be there to stand by you, just as he always stood by us.

And we promise we will always stand by all those whose struggle for justice Chief Justice Ralph Dreyfus Gants dedicated his life to standing up for.

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<sup>2</sup> Raynold Gideon & Bruce A. Evans, *Stand by Me: Screenplay 106*, <http://seattlewritinggroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Stand-by-Me-screenplay.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/QH49-B3UE>] (June 19, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> Ben. E. King, *Stand by Me*, GENIUS, <https://genius.com/Ben-e-king-stand-by-me-lyrics> [<https://perma.cc/GJ4F-9Q8C>].