

Education

New bronze of Antonin Scalia unveiled at law school in Virginia bearing his name

By [Nick Anderson](#)

October 4

As debate raged on Capitol Hill over a Supreme Court nomination that could shape the court's future for decades, five justices gathered Thursday at a law school just across the Potomac River for the unveiling of a statue honoring an icon from its recent past — the late justice Antonin Scalia.

Rising 8½ feet, the larger-than-life bronze sculpture is now the centerpiece of an atrium at the school bearing Scalia's name at George Mason University in Northern Virginia. It depicts the jurist standing in his court robe, next to a desk he used in his chambers, arms folded and head tilted slightly down in contemplation.

Four who served with Scalia were there — Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. and Justices Samuel A. Alito Jr., Elena Kagan and Clarence Thomas. So was the man who took Scalia's seat in 2017 a little more than a year after he died — Justice Neil M. Gorsuch.

Thomas paid tribute to Scalia in a five-minute speech that noted his legacy as a jurist who focused on interpreting the words of the Constitution as they were understood at the time they were written — an approach known as “originalism.”

“He probably would not want me to say this,” Thomas said, “but he often wondered whether his work really mattered, or whether it would be of much consequence in the future.”

Thomas said he assured Scalia his impact would be long-lasting. Because of Scalia, Thomas said, “even the non-originalists had to refer to the founding documents and occasionally the Constitution” — a remark that drew chuckles from the crowd — “and at least respond to the originalist arguments.”

There was no hint in any of the speeches about the [pending nomination](#) of Judge Brett M. Kavanaugh. For weeks the nomination has consumed Washington and much of the nation. If the Senate confirms President Trump's pick, Kavanaugh would cement a conservative majority on the high court with views likely to echo Scalia's jurisprudence.

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But Thursday's ceremony in Arlington was much more personal than political.

Students, faculty and others joined the extended Scalia family at the event. A reading room in the law library was also dedicated to Maureen McCarthy Scalia, the family matriarch. She sat in the front row, to the right of Thomas, facing the statue of her late husband.

The crowd admired the work of sculptor Greg Wyatt, who consulted with the Scalias at length on the project.

John F. Scalia, third of the couple's nine children, had donned one of his father's court robes and posed for Wyatt to help the sculptor get a feel for the shape of his subject's arms and fingers, cheeks and chin. The final result, John Scalia said, is a striking likeness that gave him chills when he saw it come together. It had all the right details, from his father's favorite style of wingtip dress shoes to a necktie knotted just so. "Trademark double Windsor," the son said, "with a perfect dimple in the middle."

For the Scalia Law School, [formally named for the jurist in 2016](#), the ceremony was a reminder of its proximity to elite legal circles in Washington. The renaming of the 525-student school had been somewhat controversial at the time. Critics wondered why the public university should align itself with a legal figure known as a powerful anchor of the court's conservative wing who wrote sharp-edged opinions. But George Mason President Angel Cabrera said he believes the criticism is ebbing.


Scalia's legacy, Cabrera said, is in many ways in harmony with the university's mission. "One of the themes he vigorously defended and articulated was the need for vigorous, well-informed and civil debate of ideas," Cabrera said. "That's a message that's very important. It's not an ideological message. It's a good reminder of who we should be as a university and a society."

Students said Scalia's name has raised the prominence of the school. Magdalena D'Aiuto, 22, a second-year student, or "2L," from Ocala, Fla., said she marveled that justices were on campus.

“It’s an honor that the chief justice is coming out to our school,” said D’Aiuto.

She said she was also excited to get a glimpse of Kagan. “I’m such a Supreme Court fan girl,” she joked. “I’d like to practice before the Supreme Court some day.”

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Nick Anderson covers higher education and other education topics for The Washington Post. He has been a writer and editor at The Post since 2005. [Follow](#) 

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