

'Wise Latina' wins pop culture support

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By Laura Wides-Munoz, AP Hispanic Affairs Writer | August 18, 2009

MIAMI --Wise Latina. The catch phrase of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor's Senate confirmation hearings has since taken on a life of its own, generating sales of T-shirts, note cards, dog jerseys and even thongs.

Sotomayor uttered her now famous words on several occasions -- and her critics on many more. And while the newest Supreme Court Justice sought to explain the phrase, her supporters have embraced it.

"At 55, I better have some wisdom," said Joyce Saenz Harris, a retired food writer in Dallas who recently bought a "Wise Latina" T-shirt.

"It just kind of struck me as funny," said Saenz Harris, whose family originated from Mexico. "I have known a lot of wise Latinas in my life: my mother, my grandmother, my aunts. I thought, 'Hey this is something I identify with, something I can aspire to.'"

Amy Maniatis, vice president for the online marketplace cafepress.com, one of several sites that allows people to create and sell T-shirts and other products, says the company has continued to see a growth in "Wise Latina" and other Sotomayor products over the last month, with a total of more than 4,500.

That's small potatoes compared to the 1 million items for former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, last year's Republican vice presidential candidate, but far more than the 300 for Samuel Alito, the last Supreme Court judge confirmed.

"We tend to see the site as a cultural barometer," she said. "This is the first time we've seen an outpouring support for a Supreme Court justice."

Among the spinoff items: "My Mother is a Wise Latina," "I'm marrying a wise Latina," and "I'd rather be a Wise Latina," T-shirts, as well as "Wise Latina in training," onesies. Latina Magazine is offering a limited edition T-shirt.

There's even a T-shirt with disgraced South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford chalking up his affair with an Argentinean journalist to taking advice from a "Wise Latina."

Meanwhile, at least three Wise Latina Facebook sites have popped up, spawning discussions about images of Latinas in the media.

Sotomayor used the phrase most notably in a 2001 speech in which she told Hispanic law students she hoped: "a wise Latina woman with the richness of her experiences would more often than not reach a better conclusion than a white male who hasn't lived that life."

To those who opposed Sotomayor's selection to the court, the words seemed proof she'd put personal experience above the law. To those who supported her nomination, they were simply an effort to convey pride in her roots.

For other Latinas, the latter opinion seems to have stuck, although sale numbers for "Wise Latina" products are hard to come by because the products are mostly home-designed.

"It's catching on with the local community. It's supposed to be demeaning, like our Sen. John Cornyn implied, but it's not for us," said Texan Joanna Cattanach, 28, whose birth father is Mexican-American and who sells baby-pink "Wise Latina" T-shirts through a link on her blog, Chick Talk Dallas.

Michelle Gonzalez Maldonado, who teaches Latin American studies at the University of Miami, says the phrase has taken off because it evokes an image of Hispanic women not usually seen in pop culture.

"In Hispanic culture, there is such a veneration of the older Latina figure. She represents that," she said.

And the phrase's popularity goes beyond the Puerto Rican community, said Nova Gutierrez, a Chicana teacher and New York City gallery owner who has seen small but steady sales of her online T-shirts.

"I have friends who are not Latina who are saying 'Oh I want one of those,'" Gutierrez said.

Rob Dougherty, an Irish-American from Pueblo, Co., started selling the T-shirts through the online site Zazzle.com before the confirmation hearings even started.

"If someone had made a similar remark about being a wise Norwegian, Scotsman, Greek or other there wouldn't have been this furor," he said. "But since it's about one of the groups who have been discriminated against recently, I guess people think she wants revenge."

The popularity of the phrase is about more than simply pride in Sotomayor, said Charlton McIlwain, professor of media and culture at New York University.

McIlwain describes it as a backlash to conservative lawmakers who gave the phrase a negative spin. In that, the phrase is part of a broader tradition of minority groups reclaiming phrases used to disparage them. He cited the gay community's adoption of the word queer, or some black Americans' use of the N-word.

"I think one thing many people are doing, Latinas and the Latino community in general, is reframing the phrase and saying: 'Hey, when we talk about the wise Latina, we're not trying to show that somehow we're better than others, but we want to associate being Latino with something that's wise and good.'" ■