

OPEN NINTH:
CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM
GET UNPLUGGED WITH JUDGE LATIMORE
EPISODE 132
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HOSTED BY: LISA T. MUNYON

(Music)

NARRATOR: Welcome to another episode of “Open Ninth: Conversations Beyond the Courtroom” in the Ninth Judicial Circuit Court of Florida.

And now here’s your host, Chief Judge Lisa Munyon.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Hello, and welcome to Open Ninth. I’m joined today by my colleague and friend Judge Alicia Latimore. Alicia was appointed in 2005 by Governor Jeb Bush, becoming the first African-American woman to join the Circuit bench. She is currently assigned to our Problem Solving Courts, although we’re not here today to talk about her judicial work. Instead, I’d like to focus on 9th Unplugged, her role as host, and her efforts to help keep the staff, judges and judicial assistants connected during the pandemic.

It’s great to have you here, Alicia. Thanks for joining me,

JUDGE LATIMORE: Well, thank you for having me, Chief Judge Munyon. Glad to be here.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So tell me, what is 9th Unplugged?

JUDGE LATIMORE: So 9th Unplugged is a podcast that lasts nine minutes, where I have an opportunity to do rapid-fire questions for our court staff. And it gives me an opportunity, and the community an opportunity, to learn a little bit more about our staff other than just the positions that they hold in the court system. So it gives me an opportunity to have a little bit more intimate, personal conversation with them, learn about some of their adventures, learn about some of their private -- not necessarily intimate in the sense of really private, but some things that they do when they’re away from work and they get a chance to unwind and unplug.

So it's really fun episodes that I get to have. And I've learned a lot about our staff. I've learned -- I've met a lot of people that I had not had an opportunity to meet previously. Because we tend to all just kind of walk the halls of the courthouse and don't really get a chance to sit down over a cup of coffee and talk about each other and our families and our friends and, you know, our history. And this really gives me a chance to do that.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So how did it get started?

JUDGE LATIMORE: Well, that's an interesting question. I actually was approached with the idea by Court Administration with just a question as to whether I would be interested in being the host of the podcast. And when I learned more about it, I absolutely said yes.

The former Chief Judge Myers called me and wanted to make sure I would be comfortable with doing it as well as whether it would not be a heavy burden on my calendar. And I found it to be absolutely a very interesting opportunity for me as well as an opportunity for me to step back and get unplugged. Even though it may be at the end of the day when we did our sessions, it still gave me a chance to really step out of my role as a judge and become someone who is equally interested in meeting another friend, another coworker, another employee of this Circuit.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So is that what made you say yes, is getting to know people?

JUDGE LATIMORE: What made me say yes was the fact that I believe that our court personnel really need an opportunity to be exposed to our community, and in a very popular and positive way. So podcasts are popular these days. Everyone, as we see, are holding podcasts.

And it also is a quick session where they're able to relax, get to talk to a judge in a very informal manner, and also talk about some of the things that really brings them joy. So I was

very much interested in doing that so that we could share that moment together. I looked at it as a fun opportunity, and it has been a blast.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And I think the community loves it because we have some great staff, but they are behind the scenes.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: They make our jobs easier. They make us look great. And it's wonderful that the community is getting to know them --

JUDGE LATIMORE: Absolutely.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: -- in a way that they would not have an opportunity otherwise.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Absolutely. And I was very concerned because some people -- most people are pretty shy and also had no idea what this would look like if they were sitting down across the table from me and I was able to ask them questions. And they didn't know what the questions would be necessarily. They had an idea. We -- because we provided them with a list of potential questions, but they didn't know out of those hundred questions which one that I would present to them.

But I believe that, you know, with the work of the staff, not only the one that is being interviewed, but our Court Administration that helps to do this podcast -- or the Unplugged podcast, that we were able to assure them that this was really going to be just like sitting over a cup of coffee at a coffee shop and -- after work, letting your hair down, and just relaxing and getting a chance to talk really quickly about the things that you might enjoy speaking about.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, technology often separates people, because you get your face in a phone or in a computer and you're not interacting with those around you.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: This podcast has bridged that gap. Can you tell me how?

JUDGE LATIMORE: I think because it allows everyone to be free to -- you know, to describe themselves and tell their story in a manner that they choose to.

There were instances -- and there's a form that we provide to anyone who wants to be a part of the podcast that gives them a chance to identify those topics that they don't want to discuss. So that gives them a sense of safety right there. And also it gives them some control as to what topics will be discussed even though they don't know exactly the questions that I will have.

And so with that, because we were in the midst of a pandemic when all of this started and we were all social-distancing and not able to enjoy that time with our families and friends as we used to, this gave everyone an opportunity to say, guess what, we get to come in a room -- we're going to social distance, but we get to come in a room and have those conversations that we usually would have before we had to lockdown or social distance the way that was necessary for the safety of the pandemic. And that, I think, was just an example of how much people missed socializing with others.

I am an introvert; according to Myers-Briggs I am, and I would think it's right on target.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Yeah.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Most people would not think that, but I would have to say that that's right. And so when the pandemic came and we had to socially distance and stay home and away from others, at first I was like, you know, I'm okay.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Us introverts were happy. Yeah.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Yeah. It was like, I'm good with that. Okay, not a problem. You know, text me, call me, whatever you need to do. But even after a certain amount of time, I even realized how much I missed socializing and interacting with others.

So I believe that this podcast gave everyone an opportunity -- at least -- even though it was very brief, nine minutes, you know, it still gave everyone an opportunity to have a taste of socialization and that relationship that you might have with those who you work with day in and day out, or even that you just might see walking down the hall, or you know that that's Judge so-and-so, or that's the IT guy. But it gave us all a chance to be able to reconnect again.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So how did you feel the first time you got behind the mike?

JUDGE LATIMORE: Nervous. I was very nervous because it was my first experience and I didn't want to mess it up. I just really didn't want to mess it up, and I was like, oh, my gosh, is it going to be a bomb. But once I was able to start, I do really enjoy -- even though I'm an introvert, I do enjoy interacting with people. And that's why I enjoy being a trial judge so much. I like to interact with the community. I like to know how you're doing. I like to hear about your experiences and your history. I like to laugh. And so I like the fun part of the podcast when we really come to some areas where we get to really break out in a great laugh.

And I really have enjoyed it. It took me a while to get settled. Francine, who has helped put the podcast together, assured me everything is going to be all right, so she helped walk me through that. And I think --

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: She's great at that.

JUDGE LATIMORE: She is great at that. And I probably couldn't do it if she's not over there in the corner directing me or giving me that sense of security. But as time has gone on, I've really looked forward to the next one.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: I know how busy you are as the Problem Solving Courts Judge. You are all over the Circuit in many different courthouses doing your work. How do you find time to do this podcast?

JUDGE LATIMORE: Scheduling. I mean, you know, I think it's important that not only we do our responsibilities or meet our duties in the courtroom and those that we have to do in our office and chambers as well. Lots of people think that once we're out of the courtroom we don't have anything else to do.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: They'd be very wrong about that.

JUDGE LATIMORE: I'm here to say on the podcast that that's not the case. But I also know that, as all of my colleagues, we make time for those things that we believe to be important, and particularly when it comes to our community. I'm not the only one in -- on our bench in the Ninth Circuit that takes time and fits the time in to be able to do things that we believe will be great for our Circuit, great for our staff, great for our community.

And so it's just having a good JA who can find the time on my calendar and put it there and tell me where I need to go.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what are some of the best moments that you've had doing 9th Unplugged?

JUDGE LATIMORE: I think moments have been hearing someone tell me about their experiences with their families, and particularly when they share stories about how they were raised, you know, what their small town was like growing up and how that's different compared

to where they are now. And then also just hearing the adventures. We had one guest that was bitten by a shark and --

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Oh.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Yeah. It was pretty interesting and caught me completely off guard. I did not expect that answer.

Learning about all of their hobbies and learning how creative a lot of our staff really are, I think, aside from the job that they do. And then I think the most fun is just finding their fun side. You know, they have an opportunity to really show their true selves, and that's been the charm of it all. I think that because we're able to have our guests become comfortable and feel safe and know that this is not a time in which I'm going to ask you a hard question which you may be embarrassed about or shame you somehow, that we're really just going to have fun here, and they can relax, and they open up and tell you about some of those fun things. You get to experience with -- experience it with them as they share.

So I think that just having that fun time with them. And I've had that in every single session. I can tell you, I have never left a session where I was like, oh, wow, that was not good. I -- and I haven't heard anyone -- and, you know, to say that they didn't -- that they expected it to be not as fun -- I mean, I've heard them say they expected it to be a little scarier than it was, but they usually walk out without getting outside of the door with saying, that was fun, I enjoyed that. And I'm glad that I'm able to bring at least a little fun and joy to their life during the day.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: We want to encourage our staff to participate in 9th Unplugged. What do you want people to know about being a guest?

JUDGE LATIMORE: Well, I want them to know that they're welcome, of course. I always want them to know that they are safe and they can share the stories with us, and they have

control over what they share with us. My questions are pretty open-ended, and you can answer that question any way you like, and I'm just going to run with what you're telling me.

The other thing is that I want them to feel free to know that this isn't just the staff who may be at an entry level sharing their story, but that we're also having an opportunity -- or offering an opportunity for the supervisors, those who they report to. Because I've gotten feedback that many of the -- you may be -- the lower, intermediate level want to hear from those who may be at the top level and find out their story, because they don't get a chance to really do that and they want to know more about their supervisor.

They want to know more about judges that they don't get a chance to hear, you know, in their work world. They want to know more about those people who are just within the courthouse but they don't get a chance because they're so busy working, and they do great work, but they don't get a chance to really learn more about them. So I want them to know that this is an opportunity for them to do that, not only because they're going to come and share their information, but I'm going to follow up and find someone else that they may want to know about and they get to learn some more about them.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So why should people listen, both our employees and those -- the members of the community that we serve?

JUDGE LATIMORE: Yeah, I think it's important that the community knows that the court system is made up of such wonderful people, but also recognize that it's not just those that you often see, such as the judges. And, you know, no knock to my colleagues, and not to you, Chief Judge, but, you know, those are the familiar faces -- those are the more familiar faces.

We could not do our job but for the court staff that we have working with us who work tirelessly to support us, to help us, to find solutions for us. I cannot say enough to particularly IT

and AV when the pandemic hit and we were still up and running through all of that. And no one realized -- I mean, it seemed so -- it went so smoothly. It seemed effortless almost. But they worked tirelessly and made sure that we were up and running and kept going. And they weren't the only ones, but I just want to use them as an example.

So I think it's important that the community not only sees the court system as a courthouse, as a building, and only the judges that they may happen to come in front of, or law enforcement, or probation. I think it's important that they have an opportunity and learn more about who are the people that really make up the courts. And they would be amazed at how interesting and how unique those individuals are if they listen.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: You are absolutely right. We have amazing staff.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And the more effortless something looks, the more effort that went into it to get it to that point.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Absolutely. Absolutely. And, you know, I'm not the tech guru like you may be. And so I needed a lot of assistance with, how do I turn this on again. And they were there to answer all the questions and even just, you know, case manage.

There are so many parts to the court system that many people don't realize. If you are coming to report for jury, you'd be amazed at what it takes to make sure that runs smoothly. The community may come in and say, I'm here to report, and be able to sit in the jury room, but they don't realize all the energy, the effort, the work that went behind making that become, you know, not necessarily an enjoyable day, but not a stressful and a regretful day.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what do you have planned next for 9th Unplugged? Where will it go from here?

JUDGE LATIMORE: Well, I think that what I'd like to do, as I indicated previously, is hopefully give the community an opportunity to see the other side of judges. We see judges, but we see judges in the role that they are required to uphold and follow through on with their role as in the judiciary. And that's very important. But there's a human side underneath there -- well, there's a human side in the courtroom too. I don't want to suggest that that's not there at that time.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: But we're somber and judicious in the courtroom.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Yes. Yes. And we have to maintain that. And we must be fair and impartial. And we're not to bring our personal experiences or beliefs into that decision that we may make. But there's another side that we are not able to show in the courtroom or show in our judicial role. And I think it's -- it will really surprise some members of our community just how fun and great and adventurous and smart and just, you know, unique the members of our judiciary are.

I mean, we have individuals from a diverse community. We have individuals -- you know, we have the women, we have men, we have people from different cultures, speak different languages, come from different areas of the county, and so -- and have different experiences whether it means, you know, military or not. And I just think it would be -- I'm interested. Let me just say that. I can tell you, I personally am interested in even learning more about my colleagues. And I think that that nine minutes gives us enough time to find out much -- find out about our guests, but it doesn't keep them on the hot seat too long so they're comfortable and they're able to do that without sweating. How about that.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, that sounds exciting. And I hope you get lots of takers in this new role --

JUDGE LATIMORE: How about you, Judge Munyon? How about that?

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: I -- sure.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Nice.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: I will do it.

JUDGE LATIMORE: All right. Then I'm looking forward to it. Hey, we're going to -- this is going to be the highlight of Unplugged.

We're moving to another level, Francine.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, Judge Latimore, thank you so much for being here and plugging 9th Unplugged with me today.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Well, thank you for having me.

NARRATOR: Thank you for listening to "Open Ninth: Conversations Beyond the Courtroom" brought to you by Chief Judge Lisa Munyon and the Ninth Judicial Circuit Court of Florida. Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram @ninthcircuitfl for updates on new episodes, and subscribe to Open Ninth on your favorite podcast service.

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