

OPEN NINTH

CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM

JUDICIAL SPOTLIGHT

MEET HONORABLE JOHN BEAMER

EPISODE 134

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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. Joining me today is Ninth Circuit Judge John Beamer. John was appointed to the circuit bench in 2020 and is currently serving in the domestic division. He graduated from Barry University School of Law and was a trial attorney with the law offices of Sanabria and Marsh before joining the bench. It’s great to have you here, John. Thanks for joining me.

JUDGE BEAMER: Thank you, Judge Munyon. I’m happy to be here. I’m really excited about this.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, I just want to have a conversation about you so that everyone in our community can get to know you a little bit better. So tell me about your upbringing, about your parents and where you grew up.

JUDGE BEAMER: So I’m from a great metropolitan area, Johnson City, Tennessee. It’s part of the tri-cities and most people recognize it because of Bristol Motor Speedway is just the next town over. It’s one of the tri-cities. I lived there all my life before going to college. Growing up my parents kind of really shaped my view of the world, my work ethics and things like that. And I didn’t really know, you know, how well we had it until I got older.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: How big is Johnson City, Tennessee?

JUDGE BEAMER: Right now, I believe the population is over 120,000. Could be more but when I was growing up there, I think it was in the sixties or 70,000 people so it wasn't a huge town.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So it wasn't real small but not real big either.

JUDGE BEAMER: No, but everybody knew everyone. There was – there were two high schools. One was attached to the university that's there, East Tennessee State, and then the other one is a public high school where everybody went. And there was another one in the county. But everybody knew each other, went to Church together, played baseball, little league, soccer together.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So tell me about your parents.

JUDGE BEAMER: So my dad growing up was an insurance sales man. My mom for most of her career worked at the VA hospital as an exercise physiologist, but growing up they had multiple jobs and I didn't even realize it. I thought I was just hanging out with mom and dad. Dad worked as a manager at a men's clothing store at night and so I would go and sit and have pizza and watch a black and white TV with a knob that you had to change the channels with.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Some of our listeners probably don't remember those televisions.

JUDGE BEAMER: With the rabbit ears.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Yes. The remote control was the child. You know, go change the channel.

JUDGE BEAMER: That's exactly how it was. But on other nights, my mom was a dance teacher and so I took ballet, tap and jazz as a kid. I was always goofing off in class, looking in the mirror, trying to flex like Hulk Hogan or something like that. But the dance recitals was mom. Dad coached my sports teams growing up.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So with a mom as an exercise physiologist, did you gravitate to sports when you were in school?

JUDGE BEAMER: I did. Both of my parents always supported me in everything but I was always the, usually the second smallest on any team. And so, every team that I played on, I ended up with a jersey number two and when I played soccer, there was another John on the team so my dad would just yell out my jersey number 2, 2 and it kind of stuck. Even today he'll send me a text, love you 2. I did sports growing up. And then started running cross-country to get in shape and condition for soccer and ended up being much better at running than I was at anything else and so that's what paid for college.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Oh, wow. So did you use that running ability you know to help your parents with their jobs or to, you know, work your way through high school or anything?

JUDGE BEAMER: So I ran cross-country and track in high school. And my dad also had a paper route, and so he would get me up in the mornings and I would run. After we bundled up the newspapers, I would run down the street as he was tossing newspapers out or run them up to the houses and then do a morning workout before school started, so you know, 5:00, 5:30 in the morning. Come home with him, shower up, go to school and then run again 10 or 12 miles in the afternoon before going home for dinner.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Wow. It sounds like your family was incredibly busy you know with your dad having a paper route, being in insurance and then a nighttime job. Your mom having two jobs. You know, what was that like?

JUDGE BEAMER: Well, and we had three kids. So my brother Drew is four years younger than me and then my sister, Madison is 12 years younger than me. So they – I think they relied on us older brothers for a lot of babysitting so I have a very close relationship with my little sister and my brother, but they were, I mean, they were very busy. They made it I think look easier than it actually is now that I have three kids and I'm hanging on by my fingernails some days.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Yes. I don't know how parents with three kids do it because you know I was always taught you needed to be able to guard them one on one to keep them from going through the basket.

JUDGE BEAMER: Um-hum, that's exactly how it is and then sometimes you rely on one to police the other while you're dealing with a third.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Yeah.

JUDGE BEAMER: But it's the best job I've ever had.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So sounds like you've learned a great work ethic from your parents because they worked all the time to support the family.

JUDGE BEAMER: They did. They did and they never let me get by with you know mediocrity. They always challenged me to do the best that I could but to always, you know, if I didn't put forth the effort, it wasn't going to matter how talented I was. My dad always said you

know hard work beats out talent every day and so I mean, that's one of the things he said when I was running, when I was in school, when I was in law school and practice. That's just one of the things that they taught me that has always stuck with me.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So you went to college on an athletic scholarship it sounds like.

JUDGE BEAMER: I did.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And where did you go to college?

JUDGE BEAMER: I went to Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, Tennessee on a track and cross-country scholarship. The men's track program was a club team because the ratio for men's and women's teams, it just worked out that the men's team – competition team was only for cross-country and then the track program was a club effort. And would enter races as individual competitors instead of a team. But I did that all four years of college.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what did you study?

JUDGE BEAMER: I studied political science with a minor in leadership skills and leadership studies.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And why did you choose that path when you were in college?

JUDGE BEAMER: I knew early on that I wanted to go to law school and for some reason I thought that political science would be a good route to help set up a foundation for law school. So as part of the political science program there are a lot of legal classes offered, Constitutional Law, Business Law, Legal Ethics, Women in the Law and so I tried to take all of

those classes that I could thinking that when I got to law school I'll have some sort of knowledge that would help. And it did in some respects but law school is like brain surgery. They change the way you think.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So why – what about the law attracted you before you got to law school?

JUDGE BEAMER: I've always thought that the law in an ideal setting is meant to level the playing field and everyone is treated equally under the law and the law is applied to each person equally. And I saw that as a balance to other aspects of our lives that maybe have some outside influences that don't necessarily reflect the kind of balance that's needed. But the law always, in my view, kind of felt that level of playing field or at least from an ideological perspective it's intended to.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Was there anyone as you were growing up that sort of guided that perspective and encouraged you to go to law school?

JUDGE BEAMER: Aside from my parents, there were actually two gentlemen in my hometown that looking back on it, it wasn't really an internship, I was just shadowing them around like a lost puppy just seeing what they did. One of them was a man named James Nidiffer who was a general session's judge in Johnson City who passed away recently. And the other one was a man name Eric Herron, father of my little brother's best friend. Still probably one of the best lawyers I know. But they let me kind of shadow them around during the summers in between my years of college and when I wasn't working. And I got to see – I mean, I sat in on depositions, like a sophomore in college and got to understand kind of those processes or at least see them even though I didn't know what was going on. But both of them always

encouraged me and checked in on me when I was in law school or checked in with my parents to see how I was doing. But I would say they were two of the earliest influences in terms of I guess lawyers or people involved in the law that kind of helped push me along or at least gave me a little bit of a start.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So you went to college in Tennessee, but you went to law school here in Orlando. How did you get from Tennessee to Orlando?

JUDGE BEAMER: Um, so when the time came for graduation, I took the LSATs, I had applied to other schools, was waitlisted. Some of them I didn't get into, and I got a letter from Barry University here in Orlando, Florida offering me a scholarship. At the time, I think they had just gotten their ABA accreditation, and I thought to myself, you know I've lived in Tennessee my entire life. Why don't I experience something else? And what better place to do it than Orlando? I mean, Disney is down here and that was really the only idea or concept that I had of Orlando. And so I moved down here in August of 2005 into an apartment sight unseen with my two-door Saturn packed to the brim with everything that I owned except for a bed. And drove down here and I had always intended on going back but I really enjoy the community so that's why I'm here. That and my family.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Yes. And while you were in law school, you met the love of your life.

JUDGE BEAMER: I did.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: The mother of your three children and also a judge.

JUDGE BEAMER: I did, the strongest woman I know.



CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: I would not dispute that in the world. So after you graduated from law school, what led you to litigation, because you were a litigator?

JUDGE BEAMER: So initially, when I started law school, I thought I wanted to do transactional work. I thought that you know drafting contracts would be a good field and I thought it would be lucrative. But I started on the mock trial team in law school and I was also fortunate enough to clerk for a small firm that did civil defense and worker's liab – worker's compensation defense early on in law school. And that's where I kind of got my first taste of actually litigating cases, going through discovery and it just seemed like a natural flow and fit for me. I loved being a trial attorney. And I loved I guess the mental exercise of the law but it just, I don't know, seemed something that I was passionate about and was pretty decent at it.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what kind of cases did you have when you were practicing?

JUDGE BEAMER: I've had experience in a lot of different areas. When I started out most of the work was in worker's compensation under Chapter 440. And then a lot of it was also general liability. So I was a first year associate and they would – we had a couple of class action suits and they'd send me off to you know Fort Lauderdale for an inspection or a hearing with 20 other parties. That was interesting because that seemed out of my element at that early on.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So your fellow judges that have worker's comp questions can come to you.

JUDGE BEAMER: Of course. Of course. And it's interesting because that experience helped in different areas along the way, but being at a small firm, I was given a lot of autonomy, a lot of trust but also a lot of guidance. I mean, I handled appeals and argued in front of the

DCAs as a very young attorney, which they thought I was capable of, and put their faith in me during that period of time. And then as I went on through my career, I handled products liability cases in Federal court in different jurisdictions, in Federal Court in Georgia, Louisiana. Did some construction litigation for a while and that was before my daughter was born, my oldest and after that, I went in-house with Farmers Insurance that's now Sanabria and Marsh.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And at Farmers Insurance, I would imagine you handled mostly probably auto negligence cases?

JUDGE BEAMER: There were a lot of auto negligence cases, a lot of premises liability cases, but they were toughly litigated by very competent, very good plaintiff counsels and so that always made us step our game up. And I enjoyed working with everybody in every case that I touched. I was very fortunate to have opposing counsels that were professional, very, very competent and skilled, and some of them are still close friends of mine today which is I think something that our profession needs.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Absolutely. So you're practicing as a litigator. What made you decide that you wanted to come to the bench?

JUDGE BEAMER: Somebody else asked this recently and I think – I know that I've always looked at being a judge as a place that I wanted to be with my career in terms of a progression. I saw being on the bench as – I don't want to say an end game but a goal to reach and I thought it would be much later in my career. But I also look at this job as a job of service. And I'm the first man in my family not to have joined the Navy. My grandfather, my uncle, my father did. And their service I looked at and in some respects look back and maybe have some

regrets about not doing that. But I think that using my skillset in this aspect of service is what I was meant to do.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So community service is important to you.

JUDGE BEAMER: It definitely is and that's another thing that my parents did. Growing up, my dad would take us out for Thanksgiving and Christmas -- he was on the board for the Second Harvest Food Bank. And so as young kids, we were packing boxes for elderly folks and taking them to their houses, through our Church or through the Food Bank. I guess that element or that desire for service is something that they put in my brain a long time ago as well.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And do you find you're able to serve the community while you're on the bench? Has that been something that easily translates into community service because we are in some respects so isolated from people but we see a lot of people?

JUDGE BEAMER: We do and I always thought that we are the face of the judicial branch, as being the local judges in the circuit and our county courts because we are often times the only people that our community might see in a branch of government. They vote for their legislators and you know the Governor and President, Congress and things like that, but actually getting to meet them and see them and make an impact on whatever decisions that they do, most average people probably don't have that. So I think that we have a very large responsibility to our community in performing services for them because we help guide their conduct, help set expectations and really help them with their lives.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: I know when I took the bench I was surprised. I thought I knew what judges did. I was in court every day. I had actually no clue what judges did and what the job involved. What has surprised you as you've taken the bench?

JUDGE BEAMER: I would say the amount of time and work that goes into every day off the bench because I also had a preconceived notion of what judges did because my only experience with them had been in the courtroom or in a hearing room. But I never appreciated, number one, the volume of cases especially that we have here in the Ninth Circuit in our various divisions. And the pleadings, submissions, things that come in in preparation not just for those hearings but from our self-represented litigants especially in the family division, we have a lot of those. And I definitely did not appreciate all of the hours and the work that you judges did as a practitioner that now I'm seeing the other side of that curtain. Like the Wizard of Oz, now you see how everything operates. It's daunting but I'd say, at least in my opinion, I've stood on the shoulders of giants with everybody that's here in the Ninth Circuit, you know, offered help and showing me how to find my way over the last year, especially since this pandemic, and kind of navigating all of those responsibilities.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: One of the things that I think most people, and even most lawyers, don't appreciate like you said, is the volume. When you were in practice, what was your – how many cases on average did you have that were active at any given time?

JUDGE BEAMER: I would say, in the height of my work as a trial attorney, I think I had 115 active cases in litigation in various counties and jurisdictions, all in Florida state courts.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And that's a lot for an attorney. Most attorneys don't have that many in litigation at one time.

JUDGE BEAMER: That's true. And I know other attorneys that have a lot more than that, especially in the personal injury realm. But we covered a very large area from our office in

Central Florida so I had cases up in Duval County over to Alachua and then down to Polk County and covered that entire area. So there was a lot of windshield time in driving.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Yes.

JUDGE BEAMER: And I thought that I worked a lot then. And even that I don't think prepared me for the volume that we experience as judges.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: You're in the family division now.

JUDGE BEAMER: That's correct.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And I think most of our family judges have what, between three and four thousand cases each?

JUDGE BEAMER: I think it's pretty close to that. I know that we have a lot. I looked at some of the studies recently. I think it was somewhere in the neighborhood of 40 percent of the cases that are filed in the state of Florida are domestic relations cases, if I'm not mistaken. So across the board domestic is a very high volume area but it's also a very important area that really affects the core of people's lives.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Right. And I know that I didn't appreciate all of the paper work that comes across a judge's desk when I was practicing. Have you found that to be the case that the paper work is nonstop?

JUDGE BEAMER: It is. And that's – I mean, I had to turn the alerts off of all of my emails, to stop the dinging every couple of seconds when a new pleading came in or agreed orders and things like that. But justice doesn't stop just because we have a lot of work to do and people depend on us. Yes, I have found that the day-to-day paper work is never-ending.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So you know, we've talked about your upbringing and your litigation, and being on the bench. Where do you get your inspiration? What drives you?

JUDGE BEAMER: Honestly, my children, my wife. They have – I could probably spend hours talking about them, but my wife is a steady rudder in stormy seas who's always been there to support me in everything, steer me in the right direction whenever I get a little far afield. And the best part of my day is walking home and throw the door open, the kids come running to me, like daddy and they tackle me at the door at the knees. But I mean trying to make sure that I set an example for them the way that my parents did is really what drives me more than anything else.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: How do you – I mean you and your wife have three small children, very busy jobs. How do you manage stress? What do you do to try to decompress after a day at the office?

JUDGE BEAMER: Well, after a day at the office is when the work really starts because it's dinner time and bath time –

CHIEF JUDGE MUNON: Yes, oh just wait for the homework.

JUDGE BEAMER: And so a lot of times the way I decompress, our two oldest kids, I'll put them to bed and read a book with them, and sit in there while they fall asleep because usually my oldest Grace and my little son, Henry, they'll fall asleep in the same bed and then I'll move Henry later on. That's one of the great ways to decompress and then early in the mornings I try to go to the gym.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Do you still run?

JUDGE BEAMER: I have not taken more than probably ten quick steps in about five years. And I thought that that was something that would carry over to my adult life and honestly, if I were to try to put the time that I did into running, like in college, I would never sleep. But we keep active with the kids, take them to the park, and they run around like crazy. But just spend time with them honestly is one of the ways that I'm able to decompress and try and exercise. I play guitar.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Oh.

JUDGE BEAMER: That's fun especially when the kids are trying to grab the strings. They're very intrigued by that.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, is there anything else that you want to let people know about you that might not be apparent from first blush?

JUDGE BEAMER: I don't know. Like I said earlier, I'm not – I've never been my biggest cheerleader and that's probably part of the upbringing. But I'm very fortunate to be in this position being able to serve our community and even more fortunate to be a father and husband to my wife and my kids. And that's kind of what drives everything is family.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, John, thank you for joining me here today. It's been great getting to know you.

JUDGE BEAMER: Thank you for having me. I really enjoyed it.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, good. And I'm sure that we will see a lot of each other over the next several years.

JUDGE BEAMER: I'm sure we will too. I'm looking forward to it.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Thank you.

JUDGE BEAMER: Thank you.

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