

OPEN NINTH:

CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM

VTC: A GRADUATE'S PERSPECTIVE

FEATURING EDDIE JENKINS

EPISODE 185

NOVEMBER 23, 2023

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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 guest host, the Honorable Alicia Latimore.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Veteran Treatment Courts were established here in Orange County by retired Judge Jerry Brewer in August of 2013. It is designed to assist justice-involved defendants with complex treatment needs associated with substance abuse, mental health, and other issues unique to the traumatic experience of war, such as post-traumatic stress disorder or a traumatic brain injury. Participants must be current or former members of the military. Veteran treatment court provides a team of partners which include a prosecutor, a defense attorney, treatment providers, case managers, peer support specialists, and a veteran’s justice officer from the veteran’s administration. And also a dedicated judge who use a non adversarial approach to its participants and ultimately help them to reach success by completing the program and resolving their criminal case either by dismissal or without conviction. In honor of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our circuit’s veteran’s treatment court this month, I brought Eddie here today to talk about his personal experience with the program and how his life has changed since he graduated from it. I’m thrilled to have you here with me, Eddie, in the studio and thank you for joining me.

MR. JENKINS: Thank you for having me. It’s my pleasure to be here.

JUDGE LATIMORE: So let’s catch up since you’ve graduated from the program. Just tell me a little bit, how has life been treating you?

MR. JENKINS: Life has been – life’s been really, really well. Going really well, it’s been treating me really good. After getting, or since graduating the program, it really – I don’t know

things really got into a full swing with, as far as just the everyday you know operations of life. You know so it's been good.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Good. I'm glad to know that. So let's go back a little bit so that our audience can have a little bit of history about you, if you don't mind.

MR. JENKINS: No, I don't mind at all.

JUDGE LATIMORE: All right, so I'd like you to tell the audience a little bit about yourself. Where were you originally born and raised?

MR. JENKINS: I was born in Jacksonville, Florida and I was raised in Winter Garden, Orlando area so ...

JUDGE LATIMORE: What branch of the service did you – what branch of the military did you serve and what was your rank when you ultimately came out of the military?

MR. JENKINS: I was – I was in the Marine Corps and I got out as a Corporal, E-4.

JUDGE LATIMORE: What made you decide to join the military?

MR. JENKINS: Honestly, I heard it was the hardest branch and I was in high school and after playing so many sports, I just constantly was challenging myself. I mean, growing up as a kid I was always you know running around, playing in the woods, and stuff so I was just real interested in you know the military. So when I heard that you know the Marine Corps was the toughest branch to get into, and I thought that I'd be up for the challenge. And their uniforms looked amazing.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Right, you'd thought you'd look really good in that uniform, right?

MR. JENKINS: Right.

JUDGE LATIMORE: And you did, I'm sure.

MR. JENKINS: Yeah.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Absolutely. How old were you when you went into the military?

MR. JENKINS: I was 17 – I was 17, yeah. My parents had to sign a waiver for me to be able to go so...

JUDGE LATIMORE: And at that age back when you were 17 years old, what was your expectation of your experience in the military? What did you think it was going to be like?

MR. JENKINS: I honestly, I thought it was just going to be a lot of running and gunning, just smoke bombs and just you know the wild, wild west. That's what I thought it was going to be like.

JUDGE LATIMORE: That's what you thought?

MR. JENKINS: Um-hum.

JUDGE LATIMORE: And what was your experience like when you were there?

MR. JENKINS: Here you know in the stateside, you know, when we weren't deployed, there was a lot of, you know, a lot of monotony as far as staying busy, doing training, cleaning weapons, but when you're on deployment, I mean it really was the wild, wild west.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Okay, so you had – you were in military combat, correct?

MR. JENKINS: Correct.

JUDGE LATIMORE: And where was that?

MR. JENKINS: Afghanistan.

JUDGE LATIMORE: How long were you there?

MR. JENKINS: We were there – we were there about seven months.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Okay. And what is it that you recall about that experience mostly, if you really think about –

MR. JENKINS: Oh, a lot.

JUDGE LATIMORE: If you think much about it.

MR. JENKINS: Yeah, no, I can recall a lot about it. First of all, we went on a MEU, that's you know, a MEU is a marine expeditionary unit. And we got attached to the – to the MEU and they pretty much take us to where we need to go. And I deployed with MARSOC, with Golf Company and they just took us to, I don't really know what country we initially went to. It was super secretive –

JUDGE LATIMORE: Yes.

MR. JENKINS: -- as far as our movements, what they were.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Yeah.

MR. JENKINS: But we initially got off the ship, got transported on to land and then we flew into Djibouti, in Africa and then from there went into Afghanistan.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Okay. And when you left Afghan – well, I guess while you were there, what did you feel was the real impact you were experiencing while being at war? Did you think about it? Did you think about how it was affecting you or how it might have a long-term effect on you?

MR. JENKINS: No, not at all.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Not at all. You I guess would be mostly in survival mode.

MR. JENKINS: It was but I was also young you know so I still was more willing to take unnecessary risks. So...

JUDGE LATIMORE: What do you mean by that?

MR. JENKINS: Meaning – meaning that I wasn't too concerned how things might affect me physically or mentally.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Okay.

MR. JENKINS: And going into different situations.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Okay. All right. And were there any other times when you were in combat other than Afghanistan?

MR. JENKINS: No, Afghanistan was the only theater I operated in.

JUDGE LATIMORE: After Afghanistan, excuse me, after Afghanistan you returned to the States and then you were done with your service in the military?

MR. JENKINS: No, after Afghanistan we came back to the States and we just continued doing our training. I got promoted – at that time, I came back as an E-3 which is a lance corporal and then I got meritoriously promoted to E-4 and we were training in Virginia, A.P. Hill in Virginia and I ultimately ended up getting injured while training in A.P. Hill. So that subsequently led to – led to me getting removed from the company I was with and put into a company for Marines to rehabilitate.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Okay. All right, and it was due to that injury that led you to develop what ultimately became a substance use disorder, is that correct?

MR. JENKINS: Yes, correct.

JUDGE LATIMORE: After you left, well, how did that work when you were in the unit for rehabilitating servicemen?

MR. JENKINS: It didn't work.

JUDGE LATIMORE: And tell me more about that. Why didn't it work?

MR. JENKINS: Well, there was a lack of supervision. There was a lack of direction. There was a lack of accountability. It was essentially like a big daycare.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Okay.

MR. JENKINS: That you know you slept there. It was – we got put into a specific barracks and in the mornings, we would have to come down and do our morning checking in or roll call, I guess – I don't know what else to say. Because in the mornings we would come down, we would check in and that would be it. Then we would get released from there to go to doctors' appointments, physical therapy, whatever – a lot of guys honestly in that – in that platoon were trying to get out of the service. So a lot of them were I guess – they called them malingerers. They would be malingering –

JUDGE LATIMORE: Yes.

MR. JENKINS: I guess, making more of their situation than what it was due to the fact that they wanted to exit the service. So there was a lot of that going on as well. So it just was a horrible experience.

JUDGE LATIMORE: And when it was – was it treating your rehabilitation for the purposes of your injury or was it treating any other type of condition that you were experiencing?

MR. JENKINS: Just the injury.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Just the injury.

MR. JENKINS: The injury. Anything I guess known to the individual they would be seeking treatment for.

JUDGE LATIMORE: How long were you there?

MR. JENKINS: I was there probably a year.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Okay, and what happened after you were done with that assignment?

MR. JENKINS: After I was done with that, I got put back into my original unit which was 3-A and shortly after that I made the decision to get out.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Why did you decide to get out?

MR. JENKINS: Honestly, I was no longer fit for duty, to be honest.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Why not?

MR. JENKINS: I just wasn't the same person when I originally had come into that unit. Who I became the second go around wasn't – was not anywhere close to the same person.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Okay. So once you decided to get out, where did you go once you left the service?



MR. JENKINS: Once I got out, I stayed in North Carolina probably for about four or five months and then moved back down here to Florida.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Now, did you have family to return to?

MR. JENKINS: I had family down here but me and my dad don't always see eye to eye. My parents are still together and I have two sisters. I'm the only son so me and my dad just never saw eye to eye. So when I got out, at that time, I don't even think him and I were on speaking terms.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Tell me, what was the best thing that you experienced while you were in the military? I know we're talking about some of those things that were not so good but as you think back to your experience in the military, what were some of the good things that you experienced?

MR. JENKINS: A lot of the things that I experienced were good. And a few of those being the sense of purpose was an amazing feeling, feeling like I you know am where I'm supposed to be, and knowing that I'm doing something for a greater good, it felt good. Another thing would be the level of protection that you had by being in. You know essentially you lived in this bubble and it wasn't just geographically, it just wasn't a bubble that was in one spot because if I left North Carolina and came back to Florida to visit which I did probably every other weekend. If we weren't training, I would drive home on a Friday, be back for formation on Monday. So let's say I'm driving down to Florida and I get stopped on 95 for speeding or a seatbelt violation, you know there's a certain level of protection that one would receive just from being you know in the service. So we're in the Marines, you know I can only speak for my branch.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Okay. All right. And do you still feel that sense of protection even now having been – being a Marine and as you continue to live this life, do you still feel that sense of protection?

MR. JENKINS: I do but I haven't always, but I do now. Today I do.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Wonderful. Ultimately when you came out of the military you found yourself involved in the criminal justice system, correct?

MR. JENKINS: I did.

JUDGE LATIMORE: All right, and can you share with us how it is that you became involved with the criminal justice system?

MR. JENKINS: Yeah. So like I said I was in North Carolina for about four or five months after getting out of the Marines. And I moved back down and upon moving back down I got hooked up with some old high school friends. And this goes back to being in that bubble, but while I was with those high school friends, someone had an idea to go and get some weed and get some ecstasy pills.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Okay.

MR. JENKINS: And it was in my vehicle. We got stopped and they found the weed and the ecstasy and that's when – that was my first ever arrest in life and I was ultimately put into drug court.

JUDGE LATIMORE: You started off with experiencing the drug court program even before you came to the veteran's treatment court program, correct?

MR. JENKINS: Yeah, I was in the drug court program but I didn't experience much of it.

JUDGE LATIMORE: And what do you mean by that? Share with me what that means because you weren't ready to really participate and engage at that point, right?

MR. JENKINS: Correct, yeah, that was one of them – one of the reasons. I just found it extremely difficult to navigate that program and it might have been timing as well because I had just gotten out of the service. I got arrested. My vehicle got impounded. There was a lot of things that were hard to deal with while transitioning out of the service. It was extremely difficult.

JUDGE LATIMORE: You were trying to get your footing just coming out of the service and then this hit you.

MR. JENKINS: Right. I was here about three weeks before that incident with the arrest so it was very unfortunate.

JUDGE LATIMORE: And what happened to your participation in the drug court program?

MR. JENKINS: My participation in the drug court program. Judge Whitehead was the judge that was overseeing it at that time and he honestly after being, what's the word where you go to court and you get remanded, sanctioned.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Yes.

MR. JENKINS: So after a number of sanctions, I think on my last sanction, which was probably the tenth one, he allowed me the option of getting out of the program successfully and to seek help with the VA for issues that I was dealing with while trying to do the drug court program as well.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Now, prior to you participating in the drug court program, or even prior to Judge Whitehead giving you that opportunity, were you connected with the VA? Were you taking advantages of any of the services?

MR. JENKINS: I wasn't, not at all. I don't even know if I was service connected at that time. I don't think I was.

JUDGE LATIMORE: And is there a reason why you – because you had just gotten back and you still were trying to navigate, is that a reason?

MR. JENKINS: It is – that is the main reason and the VA is a daunting task just dealing with it and trying to get where you feel like you need to be. The VA is a very big entity and you know the process for things is slow and I moved around a lot so it was – there was just a lot going on.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Okay. All right, so how did you ultimately end up in the veteran's treatment court program, if you will share that with the audience?

MR. JENKINS: Yeah, I ultimately ended up on the veteran's treatment program because once again I was involved in obtaining illegal substances and the police tried to stop my vehicle and I didn't stop fast enough. And it resulted in fleeing and alluding and possession of illegal substances so...

JUDGE LATIMORE: You were back here at the courthouse.

MR. JENKINS: I was back. I was – this time it wasn't drug court that was an option, veteran's court was, and that's only because I had in between the two times, there was a span of oh, I don't know, six years maybe and within those six years I had been to the VA and gotten

service connected. And I feel that that's the reason why I was able to take advantage of veteran's court because I was connected to the VA.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Already connected and familiar with the services that were being offered.

MR. JENKINS: Honestly, I wasn't familiar with veteran's court at all. I didn't know how any of it worked. It was presented to me as an option so I took advantage of that option.

JUDGE LATIMORE: During the time between you participating in drug court and then ultimately coming to veteran's treatment court, was your substance use increasing or were you at that point receiving services to assist you with your substance use disorder?

MR. JENKINS: It was an on again off again type of situation. I would seek help from the VA and I would do well and then I wouldn't be doing so well. And so there were a few instances of that, taking advantage of services and it going well and then not going so well. But I will say that during the time that I was presented veteran's court as an alternative to I guess not taking it –

JUDGE LATIMORE: Other ways to resolve your case like a plea or a trial.

MR. JENKINS: Correct. At that time my substance use was at an all-time high for sure.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Yes. Now did your substance use begin after you went to the military, after your service in the military or during your service in the military?

MR. JENKINS: Yeah, before the Marines I was as straight as an arrow. I didn't do anything. I didn't smoke weed, never tried weed, nothing. So to answer your question, it happened after I got injured. I was prescribed Percocet and for the first couple weeks, I didn't

even – I didn't know what they were so – so I was prescribed Percocet and that is what I ultimately gained a dependence to.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Okay. While you were at the VA even prior to coming to the veteran's treatment court, were there any other diagnosis made that you were receiving treatment for or that were service related?

MR. JENKINS: Yeah, I'm service connected for PTSD and so I was seeking or getting help from the VA, like therapists and – but once again that was an on again off again thing, you know I felt – I felt it extremely difficult to stay consistent with life.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Okay. And how is that different – how was it different for you to be in the veteran's treatment court program where you were ultimately successful in being consistent and maintaining your sobriety and ultimately graduating. How is being in veteran's treatment court a different experience?

MR. JENKINS: There are a lot of differences between veteran's court and drug court. Veteran's court there are a lot more people on your case, and I don't mean your case like your back, legitimately on your case. So having said that, with veteran's court being connected to the VA they have access to your medical records, your appointments, your – you name it, if you're doing it, they can see it. So – so yeah, just the accountability and just all the eyes on everything you're doing, that's how it's different. Drug court, my experience with drug court was Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays you show up to this office –

JUDGE LATIMORE: Treatment provider.

MR. JENKINS: Yeah, it was essentially an office in not the best area and you had to do your group class there and you had to call every single day for – to see if your color – everything

is assigned a color, whether it be black, red, gold, blue, purple and you had to call every morning this hotline to see if your color had been called. And if it had, you had to get down to that same office on top of being there Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays so there were sometimes I was there you know a week straight, Monday through Friday, whether it be a UA on Tuesday after being there on Monday and so on and so forth. So it was just a lot.

JUDGE LATIMORE: More difficult to manage for you in the drug court program.

MR. JENKINS: It was a lot more. It didn't seem as well organized. It didn't seem – it didn't seem – it didn't cater to anyone's needs, you know so...

JUDGE LATIMORE: Okay. And did you have the benefit of peer support in veteran's treatment court? Were you able – or just the camaraderie of having other veterans there, did you experience that?

MR. JENKINS: Yes. Yeah, definitely. And I think it was comforting to know that a lot of the people that I saw had gone through a lot of the same things I had. So you know it was good because drug court, you know I felt like you know an odd ball. I'm like – you know I've gone – in my mind I'm thinking I've gone through x, y, and z you know and I'm here with people who haven't gone through what I felt like you know was the same. In veteran's court it was – I didn't think that way at all.

JUDGE LATIMORE: You had a common thread with those who were participating in it because all of you were veterans and all of you had had similar experiences.

MR. JENKINS: Right.

JUDGE LATIMORE: We take what's called a non adversarial approach in the problem-solving court programs which means it's not typical court that you might see in our traditional criminal courts where there's attorneys on both sides and they're handling motions –

MR. JENKINS: Right.

JUDGE LATIMORE: -- and they're arguing their positions on behalf of their client or on behalf of the state and ultimately you may – they may have a trial or ultimately enter into a plea. Did you find being in a program that was non adversarial to be helpful or beneficial to you?

MR. JENKINS: I do. I do. I really do.

JUDGE LATIMORE: And how was that?

MR. JENKINS: It was a much more comfortable setting. It was. Yeah, I mean coming to court and going through the screening process and you know on your way in, none of that's fun but you know it eased I guess the pain of the whole process.

JUDGE LATIMORE: What was the advantage of having a case manager work with you while you were in the program?

MR. JENKINS: Well, first of all I want to say I didn't just have a case manager. I had the case manager. All right. So – no, she's awesome. Ms. Lisa is definitely one of the reasons why I was successful in the program.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Okay.

MR. JENKINS: And she would call me, she'd check on me, she'd you know ask how things were going. She you know, like I said already they could see the appointments so she



would you know – she would tell me stuff sometimes I would forget about, like oh in two weeks you've got this appointment, don't forget. I'm, that's right, so it was good.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Okay. And what else did you find to be beneficial about being the program that helped you to be successful other than Lisa and you indicated that you thought the program was much more focused and supportive, I guess. What else did you find in the program that really helped you to be successful ultimately?

MR. JENKINS: I guess one of the big things would be you know how I said that drug court didn't fit – didn't seem like it was catered to anybody's needs. I felt or I feel like veteran's court is a revised version of that. You know I feel like they really – they really thought it through I feel like and you know – and you were great to have as a judge you know because –

JUDGE LATIMORE: Oh, I appreciate that. I come behind Judge Whitehead so I know that you had the best –

MR. JENKINS: Yeah, I know. Well, it all came full circle for me you know, it's an unusual experience to be able to start where I started and end where I ended, but in the process of doing that I was able to go through both to be able to have a gauge of both. And – but it was nice to be able to come in and you know be I guess the energy and the attitudes of everybody who was working in veteran's court for the veterans, it was good. It was nice to feel – to feel welcome so –

JUDGE LATIMORE: Yes. When did you feel that you were making progress in your treatment or making progress in the program?

MR. JENKINS: I guess one of the main indicators would be my timing because I always felt like I was late to everything so –

JUDGE LATIMORE: We did have those experiences, yes.

MR. JENKINS: So when I – and the thing is because I was, it was always so hard for me to manage everything in life that you know I found myself always being right on time or late. So when I was able to manage everything in life effectively which resulted in me being able to be here on time or not as late as you know I was used to being, that was a huge indicator for me.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Well, let's just really lay it out for the audience so that they can understand. You were participating in this program. You ultimately got a job, right?

MR. JENKINS: Um-hum.

JUDGE LATIMORE: You didn't live – as I recall, you weren't living in this close area.

MR. JENKINS: No, I was not.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Right, you were living at a distance.

MR. JENKINS: Yes.

JUDGE LATIMORE: You had family and children that you were also trying balance along with –

MR. JENKINS: Yes, along with probation.

JUDGE LATIMORE: With probation. So you had a lot going on, right?

MR. JENKINS: I had a lot. I had a lot.

JUDGE LATIMORE: So I want to make sure that you know we put it out on the table that that work/life balance with program was a lot for you.

MR. JENKINS: Yes.

JUDGE LATIMORE: But you were able to ultimately get to the point where you could balance it and make it on time.

MR. JENKINS: Yes, yes.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Yes, so that must have been a good feeling when you recognized all of that.

MR. JENKINS: It was and I probably didn't ever say anything at home about it but you know I – I could tell you know that there were – there were changes, there was more efficiency in life. It felt good.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Yes. Were there any real setbacks or struggles that you had during the program that you recall?

MR. JENKINS: Yep. I actually was arrested in the middle of the program, I guess, in the middle of my time in the program. And that obviously resulted into a violation of probation, getting expedited from one jail to another, so yeah, there were some setbacks.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Ultimately you graduated.

MR. JENKINS: Um-hum.

JUDGE LATIMORE: You were able to overcome all those setbacks, achieve what you wanted to achieve in the program and reach the point in which you graduated from the program. How long were you in the program, the veteran's treatment court program?

MR. JENKINS: It feels like two years.

JUDGE LATIMORE: And when you ultimately graduated, how did you feel?

MR. JENKINS: It felt good. It felt good but at the same time it – there's a little anxiety that comes with – it's that bubble again you know, now I'm back out of a bubble, in a sense I felt like so yeah, it was good. It felt good but there was some anxiety.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Well, we always tell our veteran's court participants that we're your team and even if you graduate, we're still your team.

MR. JENKINS: Right.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Always welcome to call, always welcome to reach back out and I would guess you've stayed connected with the best-case manager, Lisa since you've left, correct?

MR. JENKINS: Correct, I have.

JUDGE LATIMORE: All right.

MR. JENKINS: I think there was probably a period of I don't know, five or six months and I reached out just to let her know that I was doing well and – because I went from talking to her or messaging her every week to you know nothing so I just wanted to reach back out and let her know that I'm still alive and well.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Yes.

MR. JENKINS: And everything is still good.

JUDGE LATIMORE: We always want to hear from you. What's life like now? What is life like?

MR. JENKINS: Life is good. Life is going really well. I'm a welder and I was a welder you know during all of this. I had – I picked up that trade after I got out of the Marines, went to school for it. But now we moved about two years ago, was it – about two years ago, I think we moved, to New Smyrna Beach and we love it. We love where we live, we love the environment. Work is good. Work has been good. Everything is going really well.

JUDGE LATIMORE: What would you say to anyone who is a veteran and who might come through the criminal justice system, and possibly have an opportunity to participate in the veteran's treatment court program, any words that you might say to them?

MR. JENKINS: Yeah, definitely if you know that there is something that you need help with and you can benefit from it – from the VA and this presents – this veteran's court presents itself as an option to really do it and sincerely do it because you know it's not an option that you want to squander, you know because it might not get presented again if you do.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Yes.

MR. JENKINS: So do it when you can and do it right. I know it's easier said than done but –

JUDGE LATIMORE: Do you think your life would be the same today if you had not participated in the veteran's treatment court program?

MR. JENKINS: No, not at all.

JUDGE LATIMORE: I can tell you we were happy to have you in our program and as I've always said, and I'm sure I said it at the graduation, I'm proud of you.

MR. JENKINS: Well, thank you.

JUDGE LATIMORE: And I thank you for your service, sir.

MR. JENKINS: It was my pleasure. It was my pleasure.

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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