

OPEN NINTH
CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM
IN MY HONEST OPINION CONNECTING THE DOTS
IN CENTRAL FLORIDA COMMUNITIES AND COURTS
EPISODE 103
JUNE 29, 2020
HOSTED BY DONALD A MYERS, JR.

(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 Don Myers.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Hello and welcome to Open Ninth. I’m here today with Scott Maxwell, local journalist and opinion columnist for the Orlando Sentinel. Scott spent the past 22 years writing about Central Florida, giving us a behind the scenes look into what’s going on in our state, especially in our community. And at times, even our courts. His written word has been a part of many of our lives for years and it is a rare treat to have him here. Thanks for joining me today, Scott.

MR. MAXWELL: Thank you, Judge, it’s an honor to be here with you.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, I love these conversations and I’m really looking forward to this one today, Scott, because I’ve had the opportunity to be a loyal reader –

MR. MAXWELL: Okay.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: -- for many years. I continue to subscribe to the Orlando Sentinel.

MR. MAXWELL: I love that you use the word opportunity. I’ve heard different words used by some readers, so thank you for that.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, we’ll talk a little bit about that, I hope. I love some of your columns too and the formats that you do them in and I’ll confess that over the years I have stolen your annual column where you make your self-disclosures. I love the idea that people that

listen to you and the people that I speak to ought to know something about me, and where I come from before they get the benefit of my thoughts and opinions.

MR. MAXWELL: Well, I stole it before you stole it from me. Charlie Reese was a long-time columnist at the Orlando Sentinel and it was a tradition he started. His general school of thought was that if I'm going to tell you what I think all year long, you should at least first understand where I stand. And since I've started doing it, which actually I guess nobody had done for a while, since Charlie had gone away, I have found a lot of other writers have started doing it. The writer for People Magazine, I've had other bloggers, and I think it's a therapeutic thing. I find it really therapeutic for myself. I mean, it's good for readers to have, but I think when you go through that exercise of reminding yourself what's important, you know, we tend to drift offline in life and sometimes get distracted. And I think when I remember the causes that I care about, the missions I believe in and why I got into this business, I think it's therapeutic at keeping us focused.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, we all wear tinted glasses. And it's important for us to recognize what it is that has tinted them so that when we find ourselves in a situation where that's going to make a difference, we can check ourselves. So I appreciate that. I think the audience, as I get the privilege of speaking to, appreciate it as well.

MR. MAXWELL: I'm sure.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: I think it's a great example of honest journalism so in that sense I think it's a good thing.

MR. MAXWELL: I appreciate that. Like I say, I enjoy doing it and it does get a really good reaction even from people who may disagree with a lot of what I write. They seem to

appreciate that candor and I try to do a little bit of self-deprecation in that as well because not only am I not perfect, my children and wife could alphabetize and still need roman numerals to give all those examples why.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, you add – you add your humility to a law degree, you could be a judge.

MR. MAXWELL: I would need a better temperance than I think I have. You all are better on that front.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Let's talk a little bit about your background and how it is that you became a journalist in the first place. Tell us where you went to school.

MR. MAXWELL: I went to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. My father actually went to Duke for law school and I grew up in Durham and for a good long time, thought I wanted to be a lawyer. Even went so far as to take the LSAT and was literally half way through the LSAT thinking I was doing fine, but after a while I just said, oh, this is not what I want to do. This involves logic and facts and I didn't want to do that. So newspapers came to mind and I actually – that's a true story. I folded up the book half way through the LSAT and left, and I had always sort of been interested in being a newspaper guy. I grew up in the seventies. It was the Watergate era, and so I used to go to my dad's law office and use his mimeograph machine to roll off papers that I would call the Maxwell House news which had fascinating stories like Scott's dad mows grass and I would distribute those around the newspaper and I think it was the idea of, you know, a couple of ink stain wretches, being able to topple a presidency, speaking truth to power from the meek to the mighty. That always appealed to me and I think it's – I never really truly wanted to do anything else.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Is your degree in journalism?

MR. MAXWELL: It is. That's a relatively useless degree, I should tell you. In fact, there are a lot of editors I have heard say, they didn't never want to hire anybody who had a degree in journalism because what the hell do you know about? You don't know about any one thing except for putting out a newspaper. Some editors would rather hire somebody with a legal degree if they want to cover courts or maybe not a medical degree, because you'd be giving up a lot of money to go work for a newspaper, but somebody who studied health sciences. I will say one thing about Chapel Hill, they were smart in that they made every journalist major also have at least a minor or an area of concentration and for me that was political science.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Okay. And so that – that would mesh with that law degree pursuit. It's funny your story about the LSAT reminds me of mine.

MR. MAXWELL: I hope you finished yours because otherwise we've got a problem.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: No, I absolutely finished it. I was a speech language pathologist when I made the decision to go back to law school. And I traveled to Emory which is where I had received my bachelor's and master's degrees to take the test, thinking oh, familiar surroundings, I'll perform at my highest. Well, I sat down in one of the Emory law school classrooms, and it was a huge classroom, I'm sure it sat a hundred or 150 and sitting directly next to me was a young woman who was taking the test as well. They told us to open the books and begin and it wasn't two minutes before she leaned over and put her head down and started crying. And five minutes later, got up, just walked out, and left.

MR. MAXWELL: Wow, so I'm that woman without the tears.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Without the tears, that's right.

MR. MAXWELL: Wow, and she – if memory serves, those tests weren't free either so
she –

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: That's exactly right. That's exactly right.

MR. MAXWELL: -- didn't get her money's worth.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So you find yourself on this path to journalism. What was
your first job?

MR. MAXWELL: Well, I actually –

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: In journalism, not your –

MR. MAXWELL: Yeah, my first job was a store clerk at the Revco Drug Store, but my
first job in journalism, I wrote for The Daily Tar Heel, which was the college paper in Chapel
Hill, but then I learned that the Chapel Hill Herald which was the small town paper would pay
you twenty-five dollars an article for people who could write. And twenty-five dollars an article
was not only a lot more than zero dollars an article but it was a lot of beer money back then. So I
started doing that and then one of the smarter things I ever did, and my wife is number one in
that, but one of the smarter things I did was they had the county government reporter quit at the
Chapel Hill Herald and I went to the editor and I said, I have got a deal for you. Don't hire a
replacement for your county government reporter. I will rearrange my classes, really just skip
most of them for my senior year, I'll work full-time for you, and all you have to pay me is
twenty-five dollars an article. There's no benefits. There's no salary. It was a good deal for
them financially and they agreed. So I spent my nights going into the rural Orange County,
Florida – Orange County, which is where I started – excuse me, Orange County, North Carolina,
and writing about county commission meetings. So I had – which – I still did other things that

college people did. After the commission meetings, I'd go to keg stands, but I had a lot of experience covering planning and zoning issues while I was still 20 and 21 years old.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, that sounds like a lot of factual writing.

MR. MAXWELL: Yeah, it was. It was, and let me tell you, you do community journalism and you get a first class lesson in getting things right. And you know, that's one thing that I think, if we sort of segue to what sort of common myths that are perpetrated by some, particularly in high levels of office about fake news. You know, the people who I work with at the Orlando Sentinel, they live in fear of getting facts wrong. They lose sleep over the idea of getting things wrong, and by the way, if you get things wrong, you don't keep your job. Now, I'm not saying we don't ever make mistakes but, in fact, we do make mistakes. We've had ridiculous mistakes. We've had reports of people being alive when they were five years dead. I mean, we make mistakes, but we publish corrections when we get it wrong. And if people get it wrong regularly, they won't have their jobs. But nobody in this business I know that I've ever met wants to get – they just want to get it right and I think that's – accuracy is something that drives most of the people – the colleagues that surround me.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So how many years total have you been writing for newspapers?

MR. MAXWELL: Well, since I started in college, that would be '92, so – let's do the math, 28 years I guess.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: All right. And 22 of those at the Sentinel?

MR. MAXWELL: Yeah, I was – I went from the Chapel Herald to the Winston Salem Journal, which is where Wake Forest is, and worked for about four years there. And then in

1998 the – an editor here at the Orlando Sentinel called me because they had a campaign they wanted covered. There was a lawyer – a little known lawyer named Mel Martinez who was running for county – back then it was called, County Chairman and they wanted a news reporter to come down and cover the race and I did. I was the county government reporter and followed Mel as he went from, as you know, from County Mayor to HUD Secretary, to Republican National, to US Senator and I actually went with him like when he got appointed to those things in Austin and met with him at the Whitehouse at one point in time. But did that for about four years and then started writing the column in 2002.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, that's a neat journey. How do you move from that type of reporting to doing what you do now which I think I described as opinion columnist?

MR. MAXWELL: Sure.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Yeah, what motivates a move like that?

MR. MAXWELL: I don't know, bossiness and know it all. I think there are – I've always sensed a real desire among readers and citizens to want the dots connected and I think most newspaper reporters are really pretty good at just giving straight information. And sometimes when you just give that straight information, it doesn't make sense. People can see a decision that was made. They can see point A, point B, point C, but it's hard for them to understand why all these things happen. My job, I view it, is to try to help people understand. And if all of a sudden you know there was \$25,000 in campaign donations that were given to a committee that you wouldn't otherwise find because we make it very hard to track money in this country, I think people have a better understanding. And I think – one of the goals I've tried to do is make things that are dry and boring interesting to people because I think man, you tune out

on so much stuff until it hits you. And the perfect example of what this state is going through right now is the Florida's unemployment system. We started writing about that in 2013. The fact that that system is a disaster is not new. I wrote about it in 2013. I wrote about it in '15. I wrote about it in '16, every one of these years, but most people tuned out and I don't blame them. If you don't need unemployment, it's not something that impacts you. It's sort of that definition of privilege is when something doesn't strike you as a problem because it's not a problem to you. Well, all of a sudden we've got about two million in Florida who understand what a problem this unemployment system is and I think we try to make people understand why they need to pay attention to things.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Excellent. So in 28 years, I mean, I think I'm older than you are and probably by a good bit. But in 28 years, we've certainly seen the rise of the newspaper and its influence. And then what I'd have to characterize as a decline dating back to really the internet and its inception and its growth, I think explosive growth, in terms of an access point for information for people. Tell me what that experience has been like.

MR. MAXWELL: Yeah, that has been tough. I mean, I am way past the hey days of the newspaper. And this will be the wrist-cutting segment of our program. The paper that I work at is a shell of its former self. We have laid off or taken buy-outs for I'm going to say seventy percent of the staff in the past maybe ten years. And that is mainly a byproduct of, largely of the internet and then started about in the mid '90s to late '90s when the internet came along and there were a lot of people in boardrooms who didn't quite understand what it was going to end up being. And at one point in time they made – newspaper execs made a horrible decision to say, you know, let's take this product that we've always charged people for, whether it was a quarter a paper or \$25.00 a month, whatever it was, a quarter a paper, let's put it on line for free

and let's see what people would rather do. Get it free or continue to pay for it. Well, that was not a tough decision for a lot of people. And that was, like I say, that was the mid-'90s, and we didn't start – there were a couple of papers that kept charging people, the smart papers, the Wall Street Journal, never made their product free. They said this is not free to create. We cannot go through SEC filings. We cannot fly all over the country, all over the globe to collect these stories without spending money. You need to pay money for the product. But most papers did not do that. And so we raised an entire generation, maybe two generations, including my children to believe there's no value in paying for news. So one of the things we have as I often tell people that's weird is more people or as many people read my stuff as ever before. It's just a lot of them don't pay for it. So newspapers have tried to go back to a subscription model, which I do not apologize for. It cost money to do anything, but that has been tough. And there's also the fragmented news – the segment, excuse me, segmentation of news. And that's that people don't want straight news sometimes. It's comforting to bathe in the warm waters of confirmation-bias, you know, and there is a network whether it's MSNBC or FOX, on one side or the other, that if you only want to hear something that sort of affirms your beliefs, you can tune into. And there are a lot of people who that's easier for and there's websites that do that as well. I'd like to think when newspapers are doing their job, when journalism is doing its job, it's going to smack you in the face with the facts and that's – that's not always comfortable for everybody.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: What was the role of the newspaper when you first began?

MR. MAXWELL: Well, I will tell you what my motto has been, that – and this is maybe not for everybody, but I believe that a newspaper's role is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the

comfortable. I believe that the mighty will always have a bullhorn, will always have a voice. I think it is really to shed light, to tell stories, to reveal facts, to empower people with information.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And here we find ourselves in this different environment. Do you still aspire to that credo?

MR. MAXWELL: I do. I do not have aspirations in general. I'm a beaten down man at this point. It is rough. Most of my colleagues have left. And I do not blame them but most of the people who have stuck around do so because they believe in what we do. It is – it is a rough business. I think the entire staff went five years without getting raises. Just two weeks ago, half the staff was put on furloughs and the other half took permanent pay cuts, not even temporary pay cuts. And I don't mean to make us sound like martyrs, and frankly, I can't complain about my own compensation, but the people who are in it are in it because they believe in the mission. Much like teachers, social workers or I think a lot of other – public defenders, prosecutors who are underpaid. I still believe in what we do and I fear for what society would be like if we weren't doing it because it's not sexy going to the Winter Park Planning and Zoning meeting or the Ocoee, you know, City Commission or the School Board meeting where the rezoning happens that decides where you're going to go to school. But if people weren't watching that, it would be rough.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: How do you find your role in reporting today versus then? I mean, how have things changed for you in the way that you compile a story that you researched, that you decide on a topic and I want to come back to that one in a minute, but what does it look like for you day to day now versus perhaps how it looked back then?

MR. MAXWELL: That's a very astute question because frankly I have to do a lot more work than I used to and the reason is because there used to be a staff four times the size we have right now. So a lot of what I do involves reporting in the first place. I mean, in maybe an ideal scenario, a team of reporters breaks open a story, it's got a lot of those facts that we were talking about a few minutes ago that are a little bit complicated and then someone like me would come along to help synthesize it and maybe say, here's how I read all these facts that those reporters put together and here's sort of what I think is the behind the scenes angle on why it happened. We don't have the same teams. We've got some great people and they're doing yeoman's work, but we don't have the same teams so I got to do a lot of the – more of the digging myself. So there is a lot of reporting but frankly, any good – any good columnist should be doing as much reporting, as they are opinionating. I mean, you know what they say, opinions are like you know what, everyone has one. I spend as much time reading the opposing opinion as I do the opinion I think I have not just because it's the altruistic thing to do but because it makes my argument stronger if you can understand what the challenges are, much like lawyers.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: I was going to say, that's exactly analogous I think to what we do in the practice of law and the lawyer who gets hung up in his own case –

MR. MAXWELL: Absolutely.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: -- is going to have – get blindsided really, when they have the chance to present it in court.

MR. MAXWELL: And you know, I get tons of emails – hundreds of emails every week and almost to a fault, I dismiss a lot of the positive ones. You know, thanks, that's great but just to go by those and I pay more attention sometimes to the critical ones. Sometimes if they're jerk

wads, that just sticks in your head but if somebody's got a point, I think – I think that's how we evolve our thinking and I think it can sometimes make the next column I write better.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: But you write a column for your negative reviews.

MR. MAXWELL: I do.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: What do you call your column – that column?

MR. MAXWELL: Hate Mail. And that was – was it Jimmy Kimmel or I think it's Jimmy Kimmel or Fallon, I can't remember. Celebrities read their mean tweets and that's where it struck me. It's kind of funny and it also, you know, when somebody calls you a really foul word and you are able to let it roll off your back, I think A, there's some humor in it and B, I think it ticks off the person who did it.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So in this changing landscape, what do you see your role, particularly as it relates to social media and other outlets for your opinions, for your research and ultimately reporting?

MR. MAXWELL: I view social media as merely an entryway or gateway to the product that we have which is the newspaper. I don't believe you can have meaningful discussions in what is it now, 280 characters. I believe that people who communicate solely through those 280 characters aren't really trying to have much of a conversation. And frankly, I think twitter is a bunch of blowhards, including me, screaming at each other. I don't believe that's – but if I could use social media to bring people to the newspaper, to the columns, and we've been able to do that relatively effectively, I believe long-form journalism – I don't believe you can have important discussions in short amounts of time, and I don't believe anything, you know, important has ever been solved in 280 characters. So I believe we have to make people

comfortable and interested in getting the full story and understanding why things happen and empowering them to take action. And really, there are very few problems that we – you know, citizens can't solve if they really understood and were passionate about doing it. One of the things, I told you I dismiss positive criticisms sometimes, people write to say, boy, I agree with you and I will think, well, that is wonderful but why are you telling me because we – we already know we're on the same page. I hope you're going to tell your state senator. I hope you'll tell your state senator that you're going to vote for somebody else if they don't agree with you.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: A lot of your columns are driven toward action, trying to get people to respond and to do things. Is that intentional?

MR. MAXWELL: Absolutely. In fact, we don't use the name of the column as much anymore but it's, Taking Names. And that's – I try to remind myself of that because if you just write a story that says, Tallahassee Sucks, that's not very meaningful. The idea is bills do not pass by themselves, they pass when people cast votes. And you need to know who those people were that cast those votes, and you need to know if they're in your district so that you can take action. So yes, I try to be very cognizant about letting folks know specifically how something happened and whom something happened. And in fact, the editorial board has done a good job with that too with this unemployment mess that's going on. This was a system that was designed to fail. We said that eight years ago. The Governor has recently begun acknowledging it was a system designed to fail. That had a vote. It had a vote in 2011 and a number of those legislators are still in office and I believe it's our job to remind people of who those legislators are.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: You have some contacts behind you because of all of your years of experience. If you had the crystal ball to look forward based on all of that experience, what do you see as the future of print media?

MR. MAXWELL: That is tough. I don't have a great crystal ball. I can tell you this; the reports of our death have been greatly exaggerated. People have been telling me, yeah, your paper is going to go under and you're not going to be printing for 15 years, you know, every year and we are still printing. And you know one of the remarkable things about the Orlando Sentinel and a lot of papers, we are still a moneymaking operation. That is something most people have no clue. I think, I don't know if I'm supposed to say this so we'll keep it between us and your thousands of listeners, I think we had I think fourteen percent profit margins last year. I mean, newspapers still make money. The problem is when you're owned by a hedge fund or Wall Street, that fourteen percent isn't enough. I mean, there's still money to be made. In fact, an ideal scenario for me would be local ownership or maybe a nonprofit ownership, someone who believes in the cause as much as they do. That's kind of one thing I've told people is I think there's still money to be made. This discussion made a little bit more sense before the pandemic struck because that is wrecking our finances. It's wrecking everybody's finances, but I think there's a way for journalism to continue. I think the big papers, the Wall, excuse me, the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, the New York Times, they're actually doing much better than they were ten years ago because they've really invested their resources not into the fluff, not into the horoscopes and the celebrity reporting, but in the things that people find value in paying for. And I think as long as newspapers do that there will be an audience for it.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, you used a phrase long-form journalism that I have not ever heard, but that I think is so descriptive of what I enjoy about print media. That chance on a Saturday or a Sunday to sit down with sometimes the week's newspapers and to be able to read at length and to get a solid understanding, to have just good journalism that's deep and reflective,

factual obviously, is critical is such an enjoyable experience for a reader. And that's what the internet, I suppose it's our there somewhere, but it just doesn't seem to offer it as easily as –

MR. MAXWELL: Or if it is out there, you're not sure about the sourcing and boy, I can't stress that enough. I don't – I always tell people, if you've got something from a source you don't recognize, why would you take it at face value. And the long form is important because, for instance, I know you know a lot of the TV reporters in town; I know a lot of them. There's some great people and they do some great work, but man, a long TV piece is like two and-a-half minutes. And if you do a word count on that, it's going to be half of what a column is. They just do not have the space to do it. Sixty minutes would sort of be the equivalent of long-form journalism because they're spending, what is it, three segments, four segments a night, fifteen to twenty minutes on each one. Unless you'd really dig in, I don't think you get a good picture for what a topic is about.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So if print media goes away, if your prediction is not as accurate as perhaps we might like it to be, what fills the void? Is it the internet?

MR. MAXWELL: Yeah, I think so, definitely, and it will be more of that segmented society where people flick around and they flick around, and it's not because their bad, it's just because they stop on the thing that makes sense to them. And the thing that makes sense to them is probably the thing that's telling them what they already believe, and I think we'll continue to get more segmented and that's not ideal.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So I promised you we'd come back and I'd ask you this question, how do you decide what to write about? What is it that spurs a story for you?

MR. MAXWELL: I hope I – if I can say this, usually something pisses me off. That's the best sign. I get up real early, usually 4:30 or something like that and start reading. And the things that really tick me off are the ones – I mean, which is the same with anybody, I imagine you, when you get ticked off, if I'm mad about something, I'm probably going to write better about it. But the other thing is when I don't understand something. If I read something and it just doesn't make sense, I think I'm not the only one who – who can't understand that story. And fortunately, through my position, I'm able to get a lot of those answers. Even people who don't like me, most of them respond to me, and I'm at least adept enough at using public records that I can get to the ones who don't want to respond. So I love that tool of being able to get answers to questions that I have. So really if I have questions, or if I'm ticked off, and then every once in a while I try to make a conscientious effort just to do something funny which is what I'm doing working on right now, try to write about my new Zoom life. I hope I can say this, when my 17-year old son, while I'm interviewing the CEO of Advent Health, went on the other side of the camera and decided to moon me. These are problems we didn't have when I was in a newsroom. Mike Bianchi, the sports columnist, I may have some beef with him, he never mooned me. But this is our – so I'm going to write about the pitfalls of working from home in a Zoom environment.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: I suspect if you interview, you could write books about that at this moment. There are so many great sources for stories and things that have happened as we've all adapted to videoconferencing in our lives.

MR. MAXWELL: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: You know I have to ask you, what do you read? If you're up at 4:30 in the morning, what is it you're reading that you're looking for inspiration from?

MR. MAXWELL: First of all, I need to come very clear and say I do not read books like I should, but it's not because I don't read. I read all day everyday but I'm short on books. I'm perusing almost exclusively state news, and that's the Tampa Times, The Bay Times, the Orlando Sentinel, The Miami Herald, Jacksonville, Tallahassee, and a lot of – and some of the blogs, most of which by the way aggregate from these other main papers. Most of what I'm doing is reading state news pretty obsessively and then the other thing I do is I try to focus on other economies that are similar to ours. I've been reading a lot about Las Vegas lately because Vegas and Orlando are two peas in a pod with low wage tourism, dependent economies that really depend on consumer spending and confidence which are in the tank right now. And I try to get ideas for what other newspapers are writing about in other similar regions.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Just internally, do you all share your articles with each other or do you just hope to catch them in the next day's paper?

MR. MAXWELL: That's a great question. What people probably would – would surprise people is I almost always share my stuff with my colleagues before I even send them to my editor. I – when we talked about – I want somebody to poke holes in my argument. The last thing I want is for the holes to be poked after it's published so I run it by – if I'm writing a story about schools, I send it to the school reporter, Leslie Postal, who has been at the paper for going on thirty years and knows everything. And she's going to say, boy, did you screw this number up when you said that or she's going to say there's a logic problem in this one. So we do that and then yes, after they're up, we sort of follow each other on Twitter and Facebook and that's a good way to get the latest things.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Would you consider yourself an optimist or a pessimist, or a realist or something – some combination of those?

MR. MAXWELL: Not a pessimist, realist is probably it but I don't think I could do my job if I wasn't an optimist of some sort because there's a lot of – I write about a lot of really awful people. I mean, there are a lot of people who do bad things but I believe we could do better. In fact, I often say, that could be Florida's motto; we could do better on a lot of things. But whether it's writing about pre-K or the services for special needs or under-funded court systems, the reason I think you write about that is the belief we can make those things better if we work at it.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So you've been here in this community for twenty plus years. There's been a lot of growth, a lot of change. I've been here longer. I've been here since the early sixties and so much change. What do you see that you have some optimism about in our community?

MR. MAXWELL: So you've seen a lot more change than I have – sixties. In fact, I would submit that there – in some ways there really hasn't been that much change in the last twenty-two years. What there simply has been is growth, and it's been growth of the same variety. And that's one of the things that I find concerning. I think a healthy economy is a diversified economy. There is a reason that Orlando and Las Vegas are getting hit harder than any other two major cities in America by this pandemic and it's because we have all our eggs in one basket and it's a low wage basket. Our industries, two main industries are tourism and then the other growth industry is growth itself. It is a billion dollar project at the airport. It is two billion dollars on I-4. It is housing; it is sprawl, it is growth. That's not sustainable and whenever a recession hits, we go deeper than anybody else does. When foreclosures happen, I think our foreclosure rate – well, you all know, from the foreclosure court. It was double I think the national average. So I think we've got to do a little bit better on that front, but what I do find

optimism in is, man, we've got some creative people here. We've got some smart people here. Just this week, I wrote about the United Arts campaign. This is individuals and companies in this community that's raised and spent more – committed more money to arts, during a pandemic, mind you than the entire state of Florida with its 93 billion dollar budget committed to the arts group statewide two years ago. That's a big deal. That's a creative thing. And that's one of the benefits of tourism. We have actors and actresses who sort of straddle, they're Cinderella by day and Lady Macbeth by night. I think a lot of that creativity and energy spills over. We're also a younger community, especially in Florida, you know, God's waiting room. Orlando has got a lot more younger people. We've got a great culinary scene that's come on in recent years. The New York Times, I think three years ago put Orlando as one of the 50 destinations on the planet –

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Finally, right.

MR. MAXWELL: At one point in time, it would have been good to be one of the 50 places on I-4, but it was the 50 places on the earth. I think that shows we're a different kind of place than we were in the sixties.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: One hundred percent. So to wrap it up, you wrote an article I think it was in this morning's paper about the decision to shut down I-4 in the midst of the pandemic but only to execute that decision when we're back in the business of resuming activity. Did you drive I-4 to get to the courthouse today?

MR. MAXWELL: No, I did not, and I recommend nobody do that. Well, actually, maybe by the time this plays it will be over, but yes, I did check however on Google maps every – well, I was writing yesterday, is that when it was, and it was red through there almost all day.

And that was when all the lanes were open. And when you ask like what one of the goals was, sometimes I have very complicated, I would like to think, intellectual and sophisticated goals where I'm trying to knit pick, that column was not one of those. That was one of those where I think everybody in the world had the same damn question. They said, wait a minute, why would you decide to do a – shut down the highway after the stay at home order expired, which it did in both Orange County and the state, and I think sometimes you just got to say what's on people's minds.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Two last questions. Your favorite story or a couple of your favorite stories over your career, what have you enjoyed writing about the most?

MR. MAXWELL: Oh, enjoyed writing about – I – well enjoyed might not be the right word. I – I've written a good deal about wrongful convictions, and I do not enjoy that at all, but that's something I'm pretty passionate about. And actually one of your predecessors, Belvin Perry, was very good and I think opened my eyes on some of that when he was the head of the Innocence Commission and that was – that gets back to one of things I talked about before is comfort the afflicted. Almost – one of the things that almost every wrongly convicted person had in common is they didn't have anybody else. They did not – they certainly did not have money. They certainly did not have a big group of people on their behalf. That's something I've been passionate about because I don't think other people are and as you know, Florida has a really rotten track record. Not most of it modern, most of it older than this, but I've enjoyed writing about that because I think other people haven't and I've talked with some of the people who've been behind bars for 15, 30 years and there was no evidence in the first place. There were theories so that's something – but that's not easy. There have been some – some of the funny stories –

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Yeah, I want to say this for our listeners because they don't get the chance to be in the room with us, but I noticed as you were telling that story and I asked the wrong question. It really may not be the series you enjoyed the most, but it clearly taps into your passion.

MR. MAXWELL: Yeah, well, it does tap into my passion but I can tell you it's also a – if I had to list a failure, it's a failure because I've made very little progress on that. There's a string of cases out of Brevard that are all tied up to a bunch of bad cases. John Preston who was on 48 hours we've written about, but it's never really progressed to – for the state to look into the other people who were probably wrongfully convicted, however, I think I started writing about that ten years ago and tomorrow at 1:00 I'll be speaking with a documentary maker about that. I mean, there's still – so that's the optimism. I think there may still be cases out there that need – and stories that need to be told.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Yeah. That's great. Scott, thank you so much for being here. What a fascinating journey you've had, and we appreciate the work that you do in the community. Certainly, I've enjoyed your work personally, but just want to express my appreciation for you being here.

MR. MAXWELL: That means a lot. Thanks for having me.

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