

OPEN NINTH

CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM

BREAKING NEWS

LEADING ANCHORWOMAN SHARES

EPISODE 115

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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 Martha Sugalski, evening news anchor for WFTV Channel 9. Martha has spent her career reporting the news for Floridians, covering some of our state’s biggest and most controversial stories. She’s been a part of many of our lives here in Central Florida for many years. And it is a rare treat to have her here with us. So thanks for joining me today, Martha.

MS. SUGALSKI: Thanks so much for having me, Judge. It’s an honor to be on your podcast. I hear it is a very successful podcast, I might add through my sources.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Oh, well, we have been very blessed with listenership. And I love that. I mean, I love it for our community because we try to talk about things that make a difference here, and about people who make a difference in our community. And that’s why we’re so grateful to have you with us.

MS. SUGALSKI: Thank you so much for having me.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, you were just telling me a story about your oldest son, and we’ll get around to that, I’m sure at some point here, but I want to talk about your background and your education. How is it you get to where you are today?

MS. SUGALSKI: From ever since I was little, I’ve always wanted to be a journalist and when I was little, I can remember being the age of my triplets who are seven and I would watch

Jessica Savage do the cut-ins for, I believe it was NBC. And here was this smart woman delivering the news and providing information to the world in essence and I just looked up to her, and this beautiful woman, intelligent. And I'm like, you know what, this is what I want to do. And I can remember my mom when we were little we'd hear an ambulance, and we'd pile into the station wagon and go chase it down and try to find out what was going on. So I've always had a nose for – some might say nosy, but I've always had the desire to know what's going on in my community. And I take great pride in being that person who is there for our community during times of trouble and need, like hurricanes and stuff like that. But I've always known from when I was little that that's what I wanted to pursue.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, that's just so huge. In this day and age we talk a lot about role models and mentors, and I'm sure at this point you are probably somebody else's role model, looking forward to an opportunity.

MS. SUGALSKI: Well, you know what, I think in my industry it's women, I've had good experiences and bad experiences. There are woman who I like to be around that lift each other up and know that when I was an intern and I got a rare opportunity to actually be on TV as an intern, there was a girl there who raised me up and taught me and showed me the ropes. And I always have hung on to that and if I can do that for someone else coming up rising through the ranks, then I want to be that voice for that person to do that. And I love mentoring. I love going to speak to kids and, you know, being honest about how our business is. It's certainly different from when I started almost 30 years ago. I think as a woman it's so important and essential to lift each other up. And unfortunately, I've had experiences where that's not necessarily the case in 30 years, but I think now more than ever, you know, we're all in this together and you got to lift each other up.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, that's really cool. And I am – tell us about your first opportunity to be in front of the camera. When did that happen for you?

MS. SUGALSKI: It happened when I was all of – was I – 21. I was on the five year plan at college so it was my last year. I graduated from FAU in Boca Raton, and I had gotten this internship at the ABC station in West Palm Beach and that's where I grew up. I'm from Philly. But I grew up, when my parents got divorced, in South Florida. And I can remember, I was going to the station. I started in sports. I was reporting from the sidelines, practicing my on-air stuff. And I walked into the news director's office one day and I said, you know, I'd really like to put something on TV and the anchor will help me, and I won't be live. It will be on tape and he's like fine, kind of I think to get me off of his back because I was such a scooch about it. And so that Saturday I can remember I put a story together and it aired. And I thought that like the clouds has spread and the sunbeam was down on me and I was like, this is it, this is it, and so then I went back to the station the next day and unfortunately, I told a slight little fib to the anchor and I said, he was the managing editor on weekends. I said, yeah, the news director said I could do it again. So I put together another story on Sunday so then on Monday when I was in – back in – I lived there, I got called into his office and I knew that it was going to be – he's like, so Martha. I said, yeah. I said, Lee, did you see my story? He's like, I saw both of your stories, but I think I only gave you permission for one. I'm like, yeah, but – but and he kind of smiled about it, but I kind of weaseled my way in and then I graduated and everyone kept saying you're never going to start in West Palm Beach. It's too big of a market. You need to go to a small market, Podunk, Iowa, no offense to Podunk, Iowa but a really small market. And I'm like, no, that's not what's going to happen. I'm going to start in Florida. So I sent a tape to Ft. Myers, one tape and I got the job.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Wow.

MS. SUGALSKI: Making all of like 15 grand a year with a \$300 clothing allowance, and – but I was so excited. My first job. I got in my Honda. I drove from West Palm Beach to the other side. I had my contract. I get called into the office two weeks later. I hadn't even been on the air as a reporter yet, and they were shutting down the news department and I lost my job.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Oh, my goodness.

MS. SUGALSKI: So I got on the phone crying because I had given up this great internship, which it's like a Harvard education. And I was crying and I drove right back from Ft. Myers, I drove straight to the station and I walked into the news director's office. I said, the news – the news department shut down, can I come back to my internship? And he goes, you know what, you've been loyal. You – this is – this is what you want to do. I can see – see it, how you write. He goes, I'm going to do better, I'm going to hire you as a reporter. So I thank the Lord that it all worked out and in this time where I was crying, I couldn't even see straight, I came back and I got a job.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So – I mean, that's phenomenal. What an incredible beginning story in to now a long career and ultimately as anchor.

MS. SUGALSKI: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So how did that transition go for you from reporter to anchor ultimately?

MS. SUGALSKI: Well, there's some people who want to anchor and there's some people who want to report, but I always knew I wanted to be at the helm of the ship and I knew I

wanted to be steering the ship. And I wanted to be that person that led our community through things and provide the information, and so I worked in West Palm Beach as a reporter. I got a number one station came calling and they hired me as their consumer reporter. Then NBC in Miami came calling. And it was in Miami where I was knocking on the general manager's door and I'm like, hey, I want to anchor. He goes, okay, I'll give you – I'll give you a shot. So of course, the weekend mornings where you're getting up at the crack of dawn, at 3 in the morning, and I did it. I was so excited and from there it just naturally progressed to I got the weekend night side anchor job. And then I moved to weekday anchor and then I got a phone call one day from WESH and the assistant news director said and I was out on a story, we have a main anchor position opening up, send me a tape now and she hung up the phone. I was like, what just happened? So I sent the tape. I came up. I auditioned. I got the job days later and then the 9 thing happened. They lured me away and I've been here I think in Orlando for going on 15 years.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So tell us a little bit, what does it mean to be anchor?

MS. SUGALSKI: To me, it's knowing that I'm there for – I know I keep on going back to being there for the community, but I can tell you what it means to me. When I'm out in public and people stop me and like, well, you did the story and you gave me this information, and I really needed it and you don't know how it changed my life. I mean, I've had women come up to me at Target crying, saying you talked about your struggles of infertility and you know what, you kept the faith and I followed – I kept reading your Facebook. I kept reading about your journey and that kept me going. So if I can be there for the community, that's what – that's what I – that's what I enjoy out of it and being the face that gets you through something. I don't think the news is all about doom and gloom. It's our job to give people relevant useful information.

And I know in this era of fake news and we've gotten a bad rep, you know, that's not what we're about. I mean, everyone who's in the news truly is in the news because we love to be the communicator. We love to tell stories. And we love to tell people that yeah, there is good stuff going on and you need to hear it besides all the crime and gore.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, I think it's so true. I look back at experiences in my life that I relate to news anchors. That's how I define that era and that event. There's lenses I guess that we now see things through so much defined by the people who told us those stories, who shared their lives sometimes like you have and who've gone out of their way to make themselves a part of this community that we are all walking through. Tell us a little bit about what your day looked like as an anchor pre-COVID, so pre-pandemic.

MS. SUGALSKI: Okay, so pre-COVID, well –

CHILD WILDER: Let's see, do we remember?

MS. SUGALSKI: Yeah, do we remember? Good point, Wilder, do we remember? It's – I'm a single mom with six children, three being – one being an attorney, two being in college and then I was blessed with the triplets. So we get up around 6:00, 6:30, get them ready for school. I take them to their elementary school. Then pick up at 2:30, so in between 8:00 and 2:30, I am working out. I'm catching up on news. I love to work out. That's my other – that's my free therapy.

CHILD WILDER: Yeah, that's basically like your hobby.

MS. SUGALSKI: It is my hobby.

CHILD WILDER: And your hobby is to clean, Mom.

MS. SUGALSKI: Okay, yes, I do like to clean. Thanks, Wilder, giving away all my secrets. So it's preparing, it's running any errands, it's getting ready for work, and then it would be picking up the triplets, and then getting them home. The nanny gets on board, what we're doing for dinner, if I needed to run to Publix. And then I race down to the station and I'm getting ready for the news. And I anchor 5:00. I anchor the 6:00, and then at 6:30, I'm legit in my car driving back up I-4 to be home by just before 7:00 to have dinner with the kids because it's very, very important to me – dinnertime is very important. I think that's your chance where as we say no phones, get off your phone, right, I think that – (Child speaking) I know – I know, I know. Okay, okay, and I think that's gotten lost in today's technology with phones and computers and what's going on. Now, because of my job, my phone is always on 24/7 because if something happens I'm there, you know. God forbid there's a – I will never say plane crash again because the last time I said that, a plane did crash in Miami so I never – I never say that. And then I tuck these guys into bed. They're in bed by 8:30. We do brush the teeth, what every other mom does, you brush teeth, make sure homework is done, clothes out the next day and then I race back down to the station. I anchor 10:00, I anchor the 11:00, and then I come back up, and then I have an hour to myself. I usually try to be in bed by 1:00. That was pre-COVID. So with COVID now, it's different.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So five and a half hours of sleep.

MS. SUGALSKI: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And you function sharp and crisp like that.

MS. SUGALSKI: And I would actually CrossFit from 7:00 to 8:00 and then come home, yeah. So I thank the Lord I can function on little sleep. And then COVID has completely changed everything around.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So tell us about that. What are the differences? What does it look like post-COVID?

MS. SUGALSKI: I'm doing what all the other moms are doing and dads too. I get up and we go downstairs and it's breakfast and my office has now turned into the children's learning center and they do Seminole-Connect. So they're home-schooled due to COVID and so we do that which is a load of fun. Like herding cats some days and making sure people aren't tweaking each other, right, and all that kind of stuff. And so –

CHILD WILDER: We don't tweak each other that much.

MS. SUGALSKI: Yeah, you don't tweak each other, right. Right, and so then they come down stairs and I have a Peloton. So I'll ride the Peloton and work out while they're – it's in the guest room. And then –

CHILD WILDER: You're obsessed with it.

MS. SUGALSKI: I am obsessed with it. Then lunch. Then I go outside with them and we play. And then because of COVID, I'm not allowed in the station till right before my shows. I'm not even allowed to do my makeup in the station. I mean, they're taking it, obviously, seriously so minimal people are in the station. No one is allowed in the studio but Greg and I, you know, for our nighttime shift and Tom. So then I'm fighting traffic at 4:00, get in at 5:00. 6:30 I'm in my car. I race back up, dinner, all that fun stuff. Back down at 10:00 and now my

new thing when I get home at midnight is I get back on the Peloton and work out till about 1:30. And then I'm in bed by 2:00.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Wow, that just sounds exhausting. Both pre and post COVID by the way.

MS. SUGALSKI: Yes, and then Wilder tells you I'm obsessed with what?

CHILD WILDER: Peloton.

MS. SUGALSKI: And vacuuming. He's like you're always vacuuming, you're always vacuuming. So anyway, that's you know –

CHILD WILDER: And you're always –

MS. SUGALSKI: And – and with COVID, they built a studio in my home. So for about four or five months, I was anchoring from downstairs in a room that has no lock on it. So –

CHILD WILDER: So we would sneak in.

MS. SUGALSKI: They would sneak in and I would be anchoring something serious. And tonight, good evening, I'm Martha Sugalski, and I would look to my left, not only was the dog in there but little people would be crawling around and it's just me in there. There's no studio operator and then one time my second son who is a pilot at Embry Riddle, he's a senior, he came home and scared one of his brothers. And that brother proceeded to come downstairs screaming on live TV and through the back –

CHILD WILDER: That was not me. It was not.

MS. SUGALSKI: It was not you. So that went viral.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And yet your ratings remain and continue to climb high and continue to climb.

MS. SUGALSKI: Our ratings are pretty – pretty good. Yeah, that’s right, they’re pretty good.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: I should say Wilder’s ratings.

MS. SUGALSKI: Wilder’s – yeah, it was his brother, his other brother, Heaton, right?

CHILD WILDER: Yes.

MS. SUGALSKI: He came screaming in and I was just like, oh, my God, what do I do, what do I do, what do I do? And he screamed and then he jumped and he went on the bed and he was crying, and you know, us mothers, and I guess dads too, we have that death stare that we give and your voice changes like that, and you’re like stop it, stop it. And he wouldn’t stop it and so my co-anchor Greg was like – took over my reads until the commercial break and then we brought him back at the end of the show to tell him he was all afraid that he was going to lose dessert, my son, and he’s so sorry, he didn’t want me to get fired. Meanwhile my news director, she’s so awesome, she’s texting me, she’s like laughing, and she’s like, is everything okay there? I’m like, everything’s fine and you know what, think of all the parents who are doing Zoom meetings and doing all of that stuff from their home. We’re all in the same boat together.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, we’ve seen it as judges for lawyers who are working out of their houses and arguing cases. You know, all different types and all sorts of significance. It is sort of the reality of today.

MS. SUGALSKI: You know, we're all – we're all doing it and it's – you know what, it's difficult. I see how the kids get, you know. I'm sure they want to be back with their friends and you know I miss hanging out with seeing my friends. But it's the reality that we're in and we all kind of I think need to give each other a break and realize that you're going hear a baby cry in someone's background if they're working from home. The dog – my dog, Fletcher has barked I can't tell you how many times and it's like really. But I brought Fletcher on TV too because he would – he was snoring one time and he snores like a freight train, so I was like if you heard the noise, this is what's snoring. And you know, so the joy of being an anchor, I'm just like you, we're all going through the same stuff. We're all worried about our kids. We're all worried about our bills. We're all worried about life and so I think it's the commonality that we all share of getting through this together.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: You remarked when we started that the – that what you do now is so different than it was 30 years ago.

MS. SUGALSKI: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Tell me about that.

MS. SUGALSKI: I can remember where I felt when I started back – way back in the day, I remember when I started and it felt like my job was of such great importance than it is today, but there were no opinions on stand-in. There was no opinions FOX News. There was no opinions MSMBC. It was just straight news and now you watch some of these shows – I call them shows, I don't even call them news casts, and it's like – it's so obvious how someone's slanted or how someone's view is. And it's so different than when I started and that was also

before the day in age of Twitter and Facebook, and Instagram which any of your listeners, please follow me on all of my social media platforms.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: How would we find you on your social media platforms?

MS. SUGALSKI: I'm Martha Sugalski, nice and simple on Twitter, Instagram and three Facebook accounts. There's also the immediacy of news. Prior to you know when I started, back in the what, Nineties. I started right out of college. If something broke, it was on TV. Now something breaks, your phone lights up. It's – you can get everything on your phone. You don't have to wait for me to come on at 5:00 o'clock in the afternoon to tell you how the day is or how's the weather going to be tomorrow. I mean, you know, Judge, you pick up your phone and it's – I don't need to know how a case turns where there's a breaking news in a ruling or if someone's guilty or not guilty because it comes across immediately on my phone. So besides giving the story and doing our jobs, it's also, we have to flip it around and get it out on all social media platforms. And how people watch news now is different. You know, kids nowadays, my oldest son, they don't watch it on TV. They are on their computers or on their phone. Things are just so much different now than when I started.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Your kids watch you on TV?

MS. SUGALSKI: They were not allowed to growing up. I was very careful with that. I didn't think that there was anything that young children needed to see on television.

CHILD WILDER: What about Spencer's --

MS. SUGALSKI: Well, now, if I know there's something good coming on, or if they happen to be in something that we're doing, then, yes, but it just really depends, but normally no. I'm not – I was never a big fan of TV much. The older children never had TVs in their rooms

growing up. It was just a personal decision and I just felt that they shouldn't see some of the stuff that's on there. I mean, you're a judge, you see what we – they didn't need to know about Casey Anthony. They didn't need to know about who just murdered so and so down the street. I just wanted to protect them and shield them as much as possible. But it was funny, my oldest son went to U of F undergrad and he was at the gym and he could get my TV station all the way up there. And he sent me a picture, he's like I'm watching you right now. I'm like you never watched me on TV. And my other son said -- he was with his girlfriend, and they're like, hey you did your hair different. I'm like, you guys never – it's pretty or something but I'm like you guys never watch TV. Oh, we just caught it today. So it's nice to see – and my daughter, she could care less. She doesn't – she'll call me at 5:30, I'll be like, Spencer, why are you calling me? And I answered one time, I'm like you better be dead or this is an emergency. She's like why, I just want to know if I can come home this weekend from FSU. I go, I'm on TV, like, I'm working, what are you doing? So she doesn't – she's not fazed by it, but sometimes I don't think there's stuff on television that they need to see.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So Martha, you've been a part of this community for such a long time and folks know you. If you head to the grocery store to pick up dinner supplies, they're going see you, they're going to recognize you. I imagine some people stop and talk to you. What are some of the challenges of being that recognizable in our community?

MS. SUGALSKI: First, I'm so thankful when someone comes up to me and says, hi, we watch you, could we take a picture, blah, blah, blah, or you talking about your struggles with infertility or when your kid ran on TV, it made me laugh. Like, thank you, we needed that. So that's an honor. I view it as a privilege to come into people's homes because there's so much out there that they could be doing, outside enjoying our beautiful weather, watching Netflix, playing

with their kids. So the fact that they tune in means more to me than they know. I can remember one time being in Publix and some children weren't behaving and we were down the aisle and I was kind of like, you guys can't do that, you got to listen, blah, blah, blah and the woman goes, oh, we watch you all the time on TV. And I'm like, I remember turning to the kids and I said, see, if you misbehave, I'm going to get in trouble for disciplining you, and I'm going to get fired so you guys need to behave all the time. And they looked because that was like the first time we had moved up here and my older three, and they were like, oh, my gosh, people are recog – you know, you guys have to behave. It has its challenges but for the most part, I'd say it's all blessings and it's all great, and I love Central Florida. I knew the second when I came up here to audition, it felt like home and I just felt right. You know that feeling when you're like, okay, this is where I'm supposed to be and I'd say it's been nothing but positive experiences, you know, being out in the public. Lately we don't go out too much just because of COVID but you know, it's nice that people watch. It really is.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, I hope we're on a path back to some normalcy in life with these announcements about vaccines and other exciting news that's come around so you know, we started our discussion today, you talking about a mentor, somebody who is a role model for you, somebody who excited you. If you could give just one or two pieces of advice to some aspiring journalist out there, what would you tell them?

MS. SUGALSKI: I would tell them to think long and hard before getting into this business. It's not an easy business. Most people have to one-man band it where when I started I had a photographer, I had an engineer, and me, we would put together this story. Now, a lot of markets, it's you're it. It's you're reporting. You are shooting. You are doing everything and you're not getting paid a lot of money. There are a lot of sacrifices. I missed my grandparents'

50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary celebration because I was working. I missed my daughter's 1<sup>st</sup> Halloween because I was working. So when the news breaks, there's no pause, I'll come back to it. When news breaks, you're on, you got to go. But on the flip side of that, you're a witness to history many times. I mean, I cried when I was out field anchoring the shuttle launches. I mean, you're right there. I could feel the rumbling and see it right up in person. I would tell someone who wants to get into this business, read, read, read, know everything you can about your community, what's important to you, what's important to other people. And realize that the business is not what it used to be and you really need to be tech savvy. You need to be – you need to know what's going on on social media. You need to know how to vet news properly. You have to realize that just because someone – I can't tell you how many times someone sees something on the Internet, oh, well, it's true. No, it's not, you know, and that's an argument when people come up to me and it's fake news and you guys are making up all the numbers about COVID. I'm like I don't have time to go to the bathroom on most days, how do I have time to make up COVID numbers? And I'm just keeping it real, Judge, but it's true. So –

CHILD WILDER: Yeah, these COVID numbers are real people.

MS. SUGALSKI: Yeah, so it's – don't – what I would tell them, you know, you got to vet things out. You got to know what news is, but it's -- I wouldn't – I couldn't see myself doing anything else. It's just the people who I've got to interview and see the stories, and I remember I left Miami and everyone is like, why are you leaving Miami? Like that's the best news and TV market ever. Within I think the first month of me getting here we had Casey Anthony. We had – I remember my producer got in my ear, we were live one day and he's like, I need you to go live. I'm like over about a snake. I said, what? A snake? He's like we sent the chopper. I'm like, wait a minute, what – what are you talking about? And that's me being the anchor, kind of

playing managing editor, like, we can't go on TV until we know what we're talking about. So let's find out more information. Martha, I'm looking at the pictures. He would tell me in my ear piece, I'm looking at the pictures now live. It's a huge snake in Apopka and it broke out of a house and blah, blah, blah. And Judge when that went live, the pictures went live, and I told our viewers, I'm seeing this as you're seeing this for the first time. And sure enough, there was this gargantuan snake that the owner had left when he went out of town, and had gotten loose. And it took like ten men to unfurl it, and I'm thinking, Central Florida is just as crazy as Miami. And there's also great stories, you know, that you see all the community coming together and helping people who are out of work or need. You know, the good stories that we can tell. We just did a story on a young man who has down syndrome who is the first man with down syndrome to complete an Ironman. We got to tell --

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Ironman.

MS. SUGALSKI: Yeah, so it's like --

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: What a great story.

MS. SUGALSKI: That story gives me goose -- like goose bumps. Those are the real stories. Like those to me are what people care about. Yeah, and if it wasn't for the media, you'd never -- you'd never know about all that stuff. The Ocoee Massacre, I didn't know about the Ocoee Massacre and here our team did a documentary on what happened one hundred years ago with blacks who tried to vote and they were killed. The Klan came in and this was a hundred -- and I never would have known about it until the stories we started to tell.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And at the time it was such a significant election for us locally. What a meaningful opportunity to share that story.

MS. SUGALSKI: And so yeah, there's just so many stories to be told so I'm – I hope I answered your question about you know, news is definitely different than what it was. To me it was almost like – it's pristine. There's something about it, and now it's kind of like any Joe Blow can tweak something and oh, yeah, this is – I'm like, that's not factual, you know.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: It's news versus entertain.

MS. SUGALSKI: That's true.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: It is. And yet you have been such a reliable, trustworthy part of our community again for so long. Martha, thank you so much for taking some time and just telling us a little of your story. I hope there will be some young women who are inspired by your journey, your path and maybe we'll look someday, we'll have a podcast about how Martha Sugalski was my role model.

MS. SUGALSKI: Aw, you're going to make me cry. That's so sweet, Judge. Thanks so much for having me. And I have respect for all you in the judicial system and all that what you do and we appreciate you.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Thank you so much.

NARRATOR: You've been listening to 'Open Ninth: Conversations Beyond the Courtroom' brought to you by Chief Judge Donald A. Myers, Jr. and the Ninth Judicial Circuit Court of Florida. For more information about the Ninth Judicial Circuit Court, follow us on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn.

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