

OPEN NINTH:

CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM

ANSWERING THE CALL

FROM ATTORNEY TO FLORIDA SUPREME COURT JUSTICE

EPISODE 118

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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. Joining me today is the newest addition to the Florida Supreme Court, Justice Jamie Grosshans. Governor DeSantis appointed Justice Grosshans to the Florida Supreme Court in September, filling the vacancy that was created when former Justice Luck was appointed to the United States Appeals Court. Prior to becoming a Justice, Jamie served on the bench at the Florida Fifth District Court of Appeal, and here in the Ninth Judicial Circuit as a County Judge. It’s wonderful to have you back here, Justice Grosshans. Thank you so much for joining me.

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: Thank you for having me.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, I am really looking forward to our conversation. I consider you to be a dear friend, but also just so proud of you and the things that you’ve accomplished. And I can’t wait for our listeners to hear some about your journey.

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: Well, I am very glad to be here. It’s always good to be in the Ninth. This is my home base where some of my best memories were found both as a beginning attorney, brand new. My first day as an attorney was in this courthouse, and so it’s a very special place for me to be.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, that’s neat. Those of our listeners who are members of the Orange County Bar Association will know that there was an article published recently about

you in the OCBA Briefs written by your husband as an insider who had been with you for a long time –

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: Deeply Embedded.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Deeply Embedded, yes. And so I know that we know some about you, but I want to go back just a little bit further than the article and talk first of all about your background, kind of where you come from. What makes you who you are? So tell us a little bit about yourself.

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: Well, I grew up primarily in a small southern town in southwest Mississippi. It was a lovely place to grow up. Very centered around family. My grandparents, both sets lived within 20 minutes of me growing up. I probably went to, you know, in a typical southern tradition, more funerals and weddings before I was ten years old than anyone has in their whole life on average because that's what you did. It's a very southern way of growing up. You go to everything involving family reunions, funerals, dinners, everything. And so those grandparents were huge influencers in my life growing up as well as my parents. Then my town was also. It was a lovely place to grow up. There were a lot of lawyers in Brookhaven, but not one female. In fact, until I went to law school, I am not sure I had met a female attorney. There were just no practicing female attorneys and to my knowledge, I had never met one. I certainly never met a female judge before. And so you know, and none of the attorneys – most of it was commercial, real estate type work, wills and estates, so I really had really not even met a litigator until I went to law school. So these are all new experiences for me.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So what are some of the things as you look back that you would describe as markers, or milestones or influences that led you to the law?

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: I think in one sense it was growing up with some very interesting people. We had – I worked for a doctor for a number of years. He was a great influence in my life as a mentor, he and his wife. And that's – I decided I was going to go be a doctor since dolphin training was just not going to work out for me. So I decided I would be a doctor and then I realized science was really hard and math, and I was not gifted in that. But I remember he told me one time, we were having an argument, and it was kind of a debate argument, and that's not something I did with a lot of people. You can't do that with your parents. You just get grounded. So I was doing that with him over a fairly insignificant subject at the time. And he looked at me and said, you know, you're really spunky. And I thought, no one's ever said that about me before but I like it. I'm going to be spunky. And I remember that. And I remember that just being something that, kind of the first time this idea that I could debate, I could talk, I could reason, really became apparent to me. And that just kind of funny interaction there, and then you know, I went on, I worked a little bit. I finished my undergrad degree and at the time then it was not the greatest economy coming out of school and getting a job. And what I really wanted to do was be an ambassador, work in a consulate overseas. And so I started researching and it appeared that the best way to do that was to go to law school first. So one January, I woke up, I said, I think I'll go to law school. I took the LSAT two weeks later and started in August. I had to actually apply for law school before I even got my scores back and there weren't – it was that last application period before they start the new class and so it was tight but I managed to get in and start that next August.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: That's incredible. So did you enjoy law school?

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: I loved law school. It was – I look back, those are just some of my treasured memories. First of all, I got to go to the University of Mississippi so I'm at Ole Miss. It's the height of football. Eli Manning was there at the time. It was just an amazing experience to be on campus. It's a beautiful campus. It's a great place to go to school. I had the most amazing group of friends. I was involved in so many sort of extracurricular activities, from different clubs, memberships. I was on moot court. I was on mock trial. I did all of those things and the aerospace journal, you know, just very interesting, things like that. And I was the editor of the yearbook, which was just funny because, you know, that's not going to get you a job as a lawyer, but it was really fun in law school. And just to create those memories for people every year. So I did everything in law school. I had the best time. I wouldn't trade those memories at all.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And so while you're there, what things did you intentionally do to pursue that dream of becoming an ambassador?

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: I took all the classes that do not help me at all now. So I took coastal and ocean law. I took international law. I took immigration. I, you know, took all of those types of classes. I took every single one that the school had at the time to better prepare for that life and then I've never used any of it.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, you and I know and I assume many of our lawyer listeners would know that while the substance of those classes may not be what you're doing now, they always still contribute to the way that we think about legal issues, the way that we analyze those issues when they come before us and impact us in some form or fashion that we may not even fully appreciate. So I'm confident that your money was well spent on those classes

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JUSTICE GROSSHANS: It was.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: -- although you didn't end up as an ambassador. So why? What happened there?

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: Well, you know, I think as is the story for many peoples' lives, I met someone. I met this very charming Floridian and we both had worked, done an internship together so he was at Florida State law and I was at Ole Miss, so we just started dating, developed a relationship and did the entire thing long distance. We had never spent more than maybe six days in a row together before we got married. And then he asked me to marry him and I said yes, and we both graduated from law school, got married two weeks later, came straight here and started bar prep three days after that.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Bar prep.

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: Bar prep. Exactly. And then started new careers within, you know, six weeks of that.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: What was your first career step?

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: I started at the Orange County State Attorney's Office in the Ninth Circuit, here in Orlando, and I'm really grateful to that because it was not common to get a job from out of state when you did not have bar results yet. In the Orange County State Attorney's Office here was one of the only ones that was willing to do that, to risk it. And so I was very grateful to them for that and so I started out with an amazing class of brand new prosecutors, many of whom you have in this courthouse on a regular basis. Judge Carly Wish and I both started together, and it was just an amazing experience to have that.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: That's great. So you start out at the State Attorney's Office and how long did you end up spending there?

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: I was there just around a year.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Okay. And you made a move at that point.

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: I did.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Into private practice?

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: I did.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And what was the area that you pursued at that time?

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: I did a good bit of work, just some very basic civil work. I started venturing out into some things that would be more in family law, primarily adoptions. I was handling some of those, but what – just some very basic work. I moved on pretty quickly to start my own firm after that and that was – that was a very big step for me. I had never planned on doing that and certainly never planned on practicing criminal defense. If you had asked me, you know, in law school if I thought I would do that, I would have said, no, that's not interesting at all. And it turned out to be the best parts of my career, and then I moved into this crazy world called family law that most attorneys shy away from. And I again never thought I would do that and I loved it. I loved both of those areas of law. I felt like they were areas of law that you could really speak to a person in times of need. You know, when people are coming to you for either of those issues, things are not going well in their lives. And I felt like it was a way to not only help, you know, in a legal sense, but help on a deeper level, to have just a brief moment of influence in those people's lives and hopefully, you know, kind of help steer in a good direction.

Especially, I had a lot of younger clients with criminal defense, you know, in their late teens, early twenties who had just made some very poor decisions. And I always used that as a way to speak into their lives and remind them that thirty years from now they're going to be wanting their dream job and the decisions they were making right then would affect that.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So your husband describes you as an out and out law nerd. What does that look like for you when you're a young lawyer in your own law practice moving into areas of the law that you really hadn't even contemplated going into?

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: It meant a lot of independent research, a lot of time spent learning, a lot of calling people, mentors and other attorneys and that's what I found in this community in particular. Lawyers were so willing to help. I would call another attorney and say, hey, can I talk this out? One of the best examples is Judge DuBois. He and I were both practicing. In fact, we had a case against each other that went all the way to trial in family law. And we came out on either side such good friends and he was a great person that when we were still practicing, I would call him, bounce things off of. Barbara Leach, who's about to be a judge here in the circuit as well, I would bounce things off of her. Judge Strowbridge with adoption questions. I mean, there were so many. We were all practicing and they were so helpful to just be able to talk to. So there was a lot of that.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: That's great. And at some point in that journey, you decided you'd like to pursue a position on the bench to become a judge. What do you think triggered that for you?

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: I can tell you precisely. It was an event in Orange County that John Jordan, Judge Jordan was speaking at, and he looked in the crowd and at the time I was

very, I mean, maybe a five year – four for five year attorney. And he looked out and he said, there's some of you that need to think about public service, that you're called for this and you really need to give that some serious thought. And I felt like he was talking to me. It was the first time I had ever thought about being a judge. And I remember telling Josh after that, you know, maybe someday I'd like to do that. I'm going to think about that. And I think that was definitely a turning point for me into actually thinking that I might do that someday.

CHIEF JUDGE MEYRS: And so for the benefit of our listeners, tell us a little bit about the steps you've taken from becoming a county court judge, how did you get to that role and then your progression through to the place where you are now.

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: Well, one thing, and people ask a lot about becoming a judge and the process. And I think one of the most important things, and the thing that helped me the most, was deciding very early on before I ever started the process what type of judge I would be. So I spent a lot of time preparing, whether it was developing what kind of philosophy I was going to have, what type – how I would approach cases, understanding the law, understanding how a judge should think because the average practicing attorney does not need to think through those things. It's not something people spend a lot of time doing, but I knew – once I – I didn't want to figure it out once I became a judge. I wanted to know beforehand. So I spent a lot of time on that and that was probably sort of the biggest preparation for it, and then just trying to be as good of an attorney as I could be. I wanted when someone called a judge or another attorney and said, tell us what you think about Jamie Grosshans, I always wanted the response to be, she represents her clients with excellence, she comes to court prepared, she is respectful and professional. And I felt like that was very important.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Absolutely, and that is the reputation you've had in our community before coming to the bench and honestly since. I mean, your work on the bench I think reflects much of that. So I have to ask you, have you settled in on your judicial philosophy or do you feel like maybe it's still kind of in the works?

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: I'm pretty settled.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Are you?

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: I'm pretty settled. I was pretty settled before I started, I think. But one of the best parts about what I've been able to do is the development of how it actually is practiced and plays out. So what sounds maybe really clear when you're reading it, looks very different when you're on a county court bench and you have a hundred people in the courtroom staring at you. It looks very different when you're working with other people on the appellate level because those are group decisions. So developing how that plays out has been very beneficial for me at every single level. And I'm so grateful for those experiences now that I'm making a decision with six other people, every single decision, it really has helped kind of mold that into a workable philosophy.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So during your entire career, you have taken those early experiences, those family experiences that were such an important part of your community in Mississippi and brought them here to Central Florida in your own family. And you've balanced so much family with so much work. Tell us a little bit about that.

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: Well, some days I'm not sure I do any of it well. But you know it's always about choosing what's important. So there have been times I have had to say no to legal volunteer activities that I would love to have been a part of because I have three

children. And they are a lot of work. And there have been times when I've had to say no to my children because my job required it. And they understand that. They've been very understanding about sacrificing me, that mom is not going to be at every event, that that is how this looks with the idea that mom has a job and an important calling. And they've been really good at that. And then I've tried to remind myself I don't have to do everything, that I delegate. I ask for help. I have a strong community of friends that are very supportive and that's been – that's been very good.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Yeah, and of course, we all know your husband, Josh, and know how involved and committed he is to not only his practice but also to family, and I think between the two of you, you really do an excellent job. And you don't give yourself enough credit I suspect on many occasions. It's a tough thing.

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: It is.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And I think –

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: It can be, just don't ask my kids if we're doing a good job.

If somebody asks me how I stay grounded, you know, as a Justice, I say, all it takes is a five year old who thinks you know nothing every single day of the week to keep you incredibly grounded.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And then in touch with your customers in that role, that's right.

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: Exactly.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: You mentioned briefly your love for college football. Does that still persist today?

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: Well, it's been a rough season, for the past six seasons I think for Ole Miss, but yes. No, it is. I love college football. You know, it's noon in the Grosshans' house, college football is on every Saturday and it's very passionate. But again, for both Josh and I it's been a rough couple of seasons – couple of years of college football.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: But Ole Miss though is one of those programs that's held up for its tradition and the college football experience so even in a rough season, you've got a lot to hang on to.

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: They're still the groove.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: That's right.

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: Absolutely.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: You had – you spent some time during your career teaching as well as an adjunct professor. Tell us about that.

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: I did. I taught, if I remember correctly, I think it was about eight years at Valencia College. I did hospitality law, so it was for hospitality majors to understand a little bit about the law that plays into the hospitality industry. And when you think about that, you have everything from employment law to contracts, negligence, civil rights issues, all different types of things play into that. So that was a great experience and I think one of the things that I learned from that, and what I really take away as being beneficial for me from that experience was communicating legal principles to people that did not have a background in law. These were not people planning on being lawyers. They were just hospitality law students going about a very different career but being able to communicate these important concepts in a

way that anyone could understand and process and take home was very important to me and I learned a lot of that.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Did you enjoy the teaching experience?

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: I did very much. It was a very sad thing for me to give up, but when that third baby came, it just – it was one of those things that had to go for a little bit, but I did miss it.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: You know, it is so fascinating to look back at our careers and recognize that the things that we made decisions to do, that were good decisions, but not necessarily for the purpose that they ended up being valuable for, and look at your background and recognize experience in criminal law both as a prosecutor and doing some defense work, civil law, domestic law, hospitality law, even things like coastal and ocean law, you know, that were courses that you took along the way, all contribute ultimately to the lawyer and now judge that you've become. So you serve now as our fifth female Justice on the Florida Supreme Court. Is that important to you?

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: It is. It is – you know, I'm just always so grateful for all the people, very particularly the women that came before me on every level of the system. I've been doing a lot of research lately because I've been giving several talks related to the suffrage celebrations and things like that, and you know, in 1990 the Florida judiciary only had ten percent women. And now we're at forty percent. And that's just amazing to me, and I think about all those women who were the first, the first, the first, and I'm just grateful I'm not a first. You know, I get to reap the benefit of all their time, their sacrifice and their work, so that there is more of that opportunity. I sit actually at the Supreme Court in my office at Justice Barkett's

desk, a desk does get passed down. That's not something I knew about the Supreme Court, but the desks get rotated and passed around. So most of the Justices have a desk that's been used for years by various Justices. So I have a desk that was used by Justice Barkett and then Justice Pariente and I get to sit at that now, and I find that very special.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: That's awesome. And you know, interestingly, I know that there will be young women that come after you that probably speak a lot of those same words about their appreciation for those that have gone before and I'm sure your name will be mentioned with those. Jamie, we could spend – excuse me, Justice Grosshans, we could spend a lot of time talking about so much of this. I'm so grateful for your willingness to come and to share a little bit more of your story with us today. Thanks for being here.

JUSTICE GROSSHANS: Thank you for having me.

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