

OPEN NINTH
CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM
FROM THE HEART OF CUBA
AN IMMIGRANT'S JOURNEY FEATURING
DR. RAUL PINO
EPISODE 135
SEPTEMBER 20, 2021
HOSTED BY: LISA MUNYON

(Music)

NARRATOR: Welcome to another episode of “Open Ninth: Conversations Beyond the Courtroom” in the Ninth Judicial Circuit Court of Florida.

And now here’s your host, Chief Judge Lisa Munyon.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Hello and welcome to Open Ninth. Back in the studio with me today is the director of the Florida Department of Health in Orange County, Dr. Raul Pino. When he was here last, we talked exclusively about COVID and its continuing impact in our community. Today we’re going to take a closer look at the man behind Orange County’s COVID response and hear his story, which is very interesting. I’m thrilled to have you here again, Dr. Pino. Thank you for joining me.

DR. PINO: Thank you.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So I can tell from your accent that you did not grow up in Orange County.

DR. PINO: No.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So can you tell me about your upbringing and where you’re from?

DR. PINO: Cuba. I was born in the central part of the island, right in the middle of the island, and to a very modest family. I was born in 1963, just right after the revolution. It was in 1959 the revolution. My mother was not involved at all in politics or the process. My father was very involved.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: How was your dad involved?

DR. PINO: So my dad, when the revolution came into power, my dad was cutting sugar cane. But he was a bright individual, very bright and though he had just elementary school, went into university because the revolution gave the opportunity. You took some tests, and you can perform, and then you move forward. And then he did his high school right away. Went into college and he became a lawyer. And then he became a Supreme Court judge for my province, my state. We call it province.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Wow.

MR. PINO: So he was very involved.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And when he practiced law, what kind of law did he practice, if you remember?

DR. PINO: Criminal law. That was his area.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Did he prosecute or defend?

DR. PINO: No, he was a judge.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Oh, he was a judge the whole time that he was –

DR. PINO: The whole time.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: -- that he was a lawyer?

DR PINO: Yes. Because in Cuba it's different than the United States. You don't have – well, after the revolution you don't have a jury of your peers. You have a jury of judges and what they call civil judges. Those are individuals in the community that have gone through some level of legal training, and they become part of that jury.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And I have never studied Cuba's legal system but I have talked to other judges from other counties in Central and South America. And they have – judges are really civil servants. They take an exam and pass the exam, and then they take exams to go higher and higher in the system. Is Cuba that same way?

DR. PINO: No. No, you know, Cuba is a dictatorship. It's by appointment.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Okay. So where did your interest in medicine come from?

DR. PINO: So I don't know because I was supposed to be a judge, a lawyer. I think I even have it in my – oh, it's in the car. In my wallet, I have a picture that my dad gave to me. I have never took it out of my wallet. He was alive when he gave it to me. And the picture says on the back, for someone that will replace me as a lawyer, and it was in 1979 I think, something like that, that he signed that.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: 1977.

DR. PINO: 1977.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Signed by Poppy.

DR. PINO: Poppy, yeah. So I was supposed to be a lawyer. But somehow, something happened. You know my grandmother was a healer and I was always intrigued by the things that she did. She lived on a farm down in the countryside, and people would come and she would heal and do things. And I think that's where things started to be some kind of little questioning about becoming a doctor. And

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: When you say your grandmother was a healer, that's interesting.

DR PINO: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: I think they call them Curador.

DR. PINO: Curador, yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: In Cuba.

DR. PINO: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And did she – did she know herbs and plants that could help individuals with specific –

DR. PINO: Yeah, she would do that which we know some. She was not interested in transmitting that to us. She actually saw it as a curse more than a blessing. If you would talk to her, she would tell you that that gift that she had, she called it a gift, was a curse and not a blessing.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Did you ever understand why she thought that?

DR. PINO: She said because you carry with you all that energy that you take from people who come sick and you heal, and then you have to deal with that. She actually got Alzheimer's very early in her life. She was in her 60s. And she died when she was in her 80s and she probably attributed the Alzheimer's so early when she was diagnosed to healing so many people.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, when you are a health care worker, whether you're a healer or a medical doctor, you do some into contact with –

DR. PINO: Oh, absolutely.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: -- with a lot of people with illness that can transmit it to you.

DR. PINO: But she would – you know, fascinating, she could diagnose – and I know this is going to sound horrible to people that are listening to this, but I have seen it. So I don't have an explanation. I don't know how it happened. I just don't have an explanation. But she would diagnose gender of babies by touching the belly or doing things. She would heal your liver and your stomach with some massages. She would use spider webs for this, sugar for that, tea. It was just fascinating. And whether it's true or not, whether science is behind that or not, what I – what I have the privilege of is seeing the part of our society that doesn't exist anymore. And that's where my privilege has been, born at that time and have met her. My kids will not have that privilege of seeing that part of human history that we don't care so much.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Right. If you are a student of history, you know that for millennia healers have been using medicines, herbs that are available, and, unfortunately, a lot of that knowledge was lost over the centuries. But it is fascinating because there are some very interesting natural substances that can do a lot for humankind.

DR. PINO: Absolutely, fascinating. It is an absolutely, fascinating world.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So how did you come to study medicine then in Cuba?

DR. PINO: So in Cuba, at that time, I don't know how it's now. You know, I left like 25 years ago so things have changed a lot. You have the right to – depending on your high school GPA, you were placed in a ranking, and then on that ranking, you would have the choices. You would put a first choice, second choice, and third choice of the careers that you wanted to pursue. And depending how many people ask for the placement before you, you would get the

opportunity if there was less. I think I was like number ten in my GPA in my high school and then I was able to get medicine. Maybe four or five came and I was able to get one.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Wow. And is studying medicine in Cuba a lot like studying medicine here in the United States?

DR. PINO: A little bit different. We don't have colleges in Cuba. We have – you go from high school to university. And you have technical schools between high school and university but you don't have college. Everything that you get in college here it gets planted into high school.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Like your general English, or –

DR. PINO: Math and science.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Literature, yeah.

DR. PINO: Now, there are some areas, like medicine, that require a more intense science background. So the first two years of med school in Cuba is what's called basic science. And then you get intense training, and you know, biology, physiology, pharmacology, all those basic science of medicine, anatomy. And then in the third year, from third to six, you go into clinical practice. And then third year, fourth year, you are always shadowing a doctor, depending on your qualifications and what area you're working, by the fifth year then you concentrate in four basic aspects of medicine, internal, gynecology, surgery or pediatrics, those are the four rotations that you do in the fifth year. And at that level, depending on your qualifications, they would allow you to see patients by yourself always with a doctor close by you, a person that is licensed. And then in the sixth year, you go into a special session where you just choose one of those four or any other and then you can do more after years of service in the community. Most doctors in

Cuba have to go for three years to serve in the community at a lower position assigned by the state in order to pay for the contribution of society to your college.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So basically to pay back college.

DR. PINO: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what did you choose to do?

DR. PINO: So in medicine, I was interested in burn treatment because the hospital that I was assigned in Havana for my rotation has one of the few burn units in Havana. There were two or three and the hospital had one. And just by accident, I got really interested in burn treatment. What really cultivated me is that it had both components. It had the clinical component of treating burns. It's very complicated. It's intensive care, basically. And then it has the surgical component, which is all the skin grafting and all the cleaning and everything that happens with burns. And that's what attracted me to that because it had both because I wasn't able to choose between, do I go clinical or do I go surgical? And that was the debate on that one because it had intensive care training. I was interested. But in Cuba burn unit, burn treatment and plus the surgery are one specialty. So I have to do both in order to fulfill that dream. And the other trick part is that you can only be trained in burn treatment at the time in Cuba at an Army hospital. So I have to become part of the Army, a medic, to be able to get that training.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So you joined the Cuban Army to become a plastic surgeon and to treat burns.

DR. PINO: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: How long did you practice medicine in Cuba?

DR. PINO: I graduated in 1987. The last day I practiced was May 20, 1993.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So getting from Cuba to the United States is not typically very easy.

DR. PINO: No.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: How did you come to be here? And I understand it took more than once.

DR. PINO: So that's an interesting story. And I'm smiling and have a smile on my face but that has not been the case for many. Many people have died trying to cross. So it's a very long story but to make it short, I tried with friends to come by boat. And we built a boat out of aluminum tubes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Oh.

DR. PINO: Yeah, because we thought it would float and we did all this science. We got – we got all dressed in black. I had a child at that time, two years old. That was crazy to make that decision but that's how desperate you are. And I've been traumatized by the memories of me showing my child – I have to talk to Raul. I don't know if he remember this, but for weeks I trained my child to float on my back and hang from my neck because I was concerned that that boat could not make it, to be able to take so much. I was stupid.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Or desperate.

DR. PINO: Or desperate. But desperation takes you to stupidity very quick. And how –

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: What made you want – what made you desperate enough to take such a risk?

DR. PINO: That's a very interesting question. So many things, it was just not one thing. First, I have a wife at the time and I'm very thankful to her. She knows this. Actually, we were talking the other day about this. She wanted to come. She didn't believe in the system. She was disappointed. She wanted a better life for her child. And she's an excellent mother. And that was my limit. But things that contributed really, really affected me is I lived only maybe twenty miles from a hospital. I would have to get up at 4:00 o'clock in the morning every day to be able to be in surgery by 8:00. I was dead. I remember taking naps on the floor of the OR between surgeries because I couldn't take any more. And then getting home, it was 4:00 o'clock to 8:00 o'clock. It would take me four hours for twenty miles trip.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Wow.

DR. PINO: Because I have to take four buses. That was one limit. But the thing that I really remember the most is, I was in my Army uniform waiting for one of the buses, the last bus. I had holes in my shoes, the uniform shoes because there no shoes. And I have to have the shoes or you would get penalized. So I put cardboard inside of the shoes. And it started to rain. And something I hate in my life is to have my feet wet. I hate to be wet but feet, and it started pouring. And the bus stop, the bus shelter was full so I was just exposed, drenched. And at that time, because it was in the area of where he lived at the time, Fidel Castro came in the limousine, and I'm not going to use the word, but it was with F and I said, I had it.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So you were not the – you having cardboard in your shoes and wet cardboard at that, you were not overly impressed with Castro being in his limousine completely dry and oblivious to the plight of all of the people that were around him?

DR. PINO: Yeah. I just had it. It may be unjustified, it may be just simplistic but I don't think that it's one thing. It's an accumulation of things and the laws of freedom. But in my case, at the time when I didn't know freedom at all. I had no idea what it was, and we were not pursuing materialistic things because we didn't have that in Cuba either. But we were happy at some point. Maybe because we didn't know any better or didn't know any better or because we were oblivious to our own situation because a lack of information. But at the time the decision, I would lie to you if the decision was only about freedom. No, I didn't know freedom. For me, the decision was about economics and future at the time and it was mostly about my son. What I didn't want him to experience, that was the conversation, that was the discussion, that was the agreement with my ex-wife now.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what happened in that homemade boat when you were trying to get to the United States?

DR. PINO: Oh, God, so we all got dressed in black. You know, this was an entire operation. This is our fantasy and our desperation. And the sad part is that we were not the only ones and there are many who have died. And that's the sad part of what's happening in Cuba too at this point when we are taping this. And so the boat got built. We were biking to get on the boat and we got news that the boat sank as soon as they put it in the water. So yeah, that was – yeah. That was another indication this is not the way.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what did you do then?

DR. PINO: So we went home but the security had an informant in the group that was about to leave, which now makes sense. You know, when you look back. And so they – they – for about a week, and I wasn't expecting this part, so I don't have the days straight, kind of blur a

little bit, but for about a week after that, they – they followed me everywhere in a way that they want me to know that they knew and they were following.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Yeah.

DR. PINO: And later they explained why. And I was going to surgery, I was getting trained for nose surgery at the time which I hate nose surgery so I never – I never would do one, but I have to go through training. And they were outside the OR. I mean, I'd see them. I could see them. And when I went home, we live – we live in a place called Playa Jibacoa. We lived next to the ocean so there's like an ocean wall front across our house on the ocean. They would sit, a couple of them, on that bench all night. And they would come in closed vehicles, you know, Russian military trucks, jeeps has a very particular sound.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Um-hum.

DR. PINO: And they would come, err, epee, bum bum bum bum, open and close the door in the middle of the night. So they did that for a week. Then one night I was coming from the hospital and I knew – I was getting really tired of the thing so I think it's Sunday, a Sunday – had to be a Sunday. I have to bike ten miles to my mother in law's home to get half a liter of milk a day for Raul.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Wow.

DR. PINO: Yeah. So I will go every other day and then she would have a liter for me, but he would get half a liter at the time. I don't know what it is now a day, and I have to bike to get it. So that day, I went to get – we all went and it looks like they lose control of us. And when they saw the house closed or whatever, they start asking for us around the town. And it's a very small town. It's like a fishing village. So when I came back, when we came back, we were

all on bike I think. When we came back, a couple of neighbors said, hey, they were looking for you. Hey, they were looking for you. And I just had it. So I went to the barracks of the town, knock on the door, say, were you looking for me? I'm here, what do you want? Because even started giving me anxiety. It was getting to the point that I was not able to tolerate any more so next Monday, the Monday after, when I came from the hospital, I got out of the bus and I saw my next-door neighbor who was in her 80s, and she was very attached to the revolution, getting on her walkie-talkie. I say, that was weird. I didn't even know she has a walkie-talkie, but I didn't make any – I didn't connect it because it's kind of silly. I just want to get home. So I took my shirt off at the door. Raul came running to me, Poppy, Poppy, Poppy. He always bring something, or whatever, you know make it fun. I put the shirt on the back of the chair. They were at the door already. They say, hey, Dr. Pino. I wasn't expecting it so when I saw them, I said, oh, boy, and they were fully uniformed. And I knew one of the guys from the hospital because he was the secret police in the hospital. So I said, okay. I said to them, do I need to bring my toothbrush. I say, am I going to stay long enough. They say, oh, no, no, we have a situation at the hospital and we need your help. So and so is calling you, the director of the hospital. I say, okay, and they asked for water. Our frig was broken. I have to go to the next-door neighbor to get them the water. This guy saw me walking through the back of the house. He walked from the front, parallel to me with his hand. The holster was off. And I'm not going to repeat the word but it starts with MF. I say this guy is going to shoot me. This guy is ready to shoot me. And I have done nothing but just wanting to have a better life. So they took me. Raul cried – in front of Raul crying like crazy and they took me to a place that they never told me where the place was. I don't even at this point know where the place was. It was in the middle of the night. It was in kind of a basement, some kind of base, and they never told me or told my

family where I was. I was there for a week. They interrogated. Never, never, I have to say, I was never physically touched. That's not the case for many people. But in my case, they were very respectful of me, although psychologically they did everything. And I said to them, you know you need to stop because I'm going to tell you everything. We are here, you know, so I'm not going to hide that I was trying to leave.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And I bet your family was very worried not knowing where you were or hearing from you for a week?

DR. PINO: So when I left that night, Raul – Raul had asthma when he was a kid and the next day in the morning, because when they took me to a small room, the guy said, that comes with a uniform, with a prisoner's uniform. Give it to me. He says change. I said for what. Oh, you are going inside. I say I was told that I was coming here to talk. Oh, no, you are detained. Give me your watch, give me your wallet, give me everything, you're in. So next day the same guy that arrested me, came, they took me to a very nice room and said, you know, we want to know what's happening at home. You know, we took you. Do you have any concerns? They were nice in that regard. I said, well, I'm concerned about Raul because he was with asthma last night and actually was trying to find medication for him. He said, well, I will go to your house and try to find out how your child is which is part of the strategy. And they went to my house. And the guy came the next day or maybe that afternoon and say, I went to your house and I say how is my son. He say, I don't know. I say, how you don't know. He say your wife kick me out of your house. I said what? And that's my wife, or my ex-wife. Yeah, she said when I asked for you, she said to me, you have no right to come here to my house to ask me for anything when you took my husband last night abruptly without letting us even know where he's at. So tell him

that Wilbur is fine. And the guy say, who's Wilbur? I say Wilbur is the pig. And then he say, oh, she just called me a pig. And I say I'm afraid so.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: It sounds like she was – had quite a fiery spirit.

DR. PINO: She is. You don't mess with her family.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So how did you finally get to the United States?

DR. PINO: So when – because I was in the Army. I got kicked out of my job. And they – the next door neighbor knew that I had been, you know, forcibly out of my job because part of this, they also do what they call a moral tribunal, and you are taken to a special court by your peers, in this case, everything that is above your rank. I was a Captain so everything – everyone above Captain in the unit would come to that trial. It's a trial, it's moral trial. And they take you – they take your grades. So they rip it off your shirt and they insult you and tell you everything that you don't want to know. And that was part of the process. And part of that conclusion for that moral trial was to get expelled from the hospital and the Army. And with that I lost my job. So the United States embassy in Havana at that time had a program for political refugees, for people who were persecuted and you know targeted by the government, and these type of conditions did qualify for that. So my next-door neighbor knew about that and he knew someone who knew someone who knew someone, so I put my application through and the process took two years. So I put the application in 1993. I came in 1995.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: What did you do in that two years to support your family?

DR. PINO: Steal, in this way so people should know that I'm now in the courthouse but that's really what happened. So I have a neighbor that – another neighbor worked in a chicken butcher plant and in the freezers. So I went to work there and we could take, although it was not

legal, it was not illegal because they will not do anything, but you could take the fat of the chicken and the skins. And we ate that many times. And also from time to time they would give you a chicken. I also raised pigs. That was Wilbur and others. We always named it and that's a mistake, never name your pig because then you have a hard time killing it. It becomes a pet.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Yes.

DR. PINO: It's terrible. And many things, anything that I could do. So any odd thing. And Sandra, my ex-wife, continued to work until basically the end, so she sustained the family for a while too.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So once you got approved to come to the United States as a political refugee, was it difficult for the United States to get you out of Cuba because I would imagine that that –

DR. PINO: So I think Cuba let me go to be honest. I don't have proof of that but I don't think that it was an accident because that type of accident normally don't happen. So because my father was so involved in the revolution, even during this process because they were supposed to take me to trial for ten years for treason. That was the sentence that they were asking for. They said because your father's commitment to the revolution, we are going to show you how benevolent we can be. They said that so I think that may have to do.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So once you got to the United States, where did you go?

DR. PINO: So prior to all this, I met Mark Pendleton, was an American student from Florida International University in Jacksonville who went to Cuba to study in the seminary to become an Episcopal priest. At the time he was staying at the bishop's house in Havana. And the bishop's son was my last patient in my hospital, in my original hospital. This kid got a stab

and I treated him. He was in one of my beds. So we became friends with the family. And when all this happened, this guy's father, say, why don't you write to Mark. Mark may be your sponsor, may he want to be. I wrote to Mark. At the time he was in New Jersey and he say, yes, I will be honored to sponsor you. He sponsored me. So at the time he was in Connecticut so that's how we ended up in Connecticut. We got assigned in Connecticut and like any immigrants, right away, got to work, in my case picking blueberries. Hated blueberries for a long time. They are freaking difficult to pick.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And it can be hot picking them.

DR. PINO: Yeah, and when you touch it, they explode in your hand if you are not careful. And you cannot, like coffee, you cannot you know, drain, you have to go one by one. So I picked blueberries and Sandra started baking pies for a farm, a farmer's stand, and then groceries on the weekends. She got a job first as a community health worker and I got a license first. We only had one car so I was her driver during the day and I will work in the groceries during the afternoon, the weekends because she has a better job with benefits. So and then I got into a hospital when I became a nurse assistant, then into a place called the Hispanic Council doing research on HIV, sexual violence and STDs. Moved to another research institution and there I became – I went out to be a PI, a Principal Investigator, or called PI, for work on training on social networks. And then went to Hartford as the health, assistant health director in Stamford, Connecticut and then here. The rest is just history.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So you had some formal training in the United States.

DR. PINO: Yes, my MPH was in the United States.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: All right. And that was in Connecticut?

DR. PINO: Yes, the school of medicine in Connecticut.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: All right. And how long did you work in Connecticut at the Office of Public Health or the department?

DR. PINO: So in Connecticut, I work at the City of Hartford probably from 19 – so I have to take that back. At the state of Connecticut Health Department, I work from 19 – maybe 19 – 2012 to 20 – from 2010 to 2015. And then I went to the City of Hartford, I went back to the state of Connecticut, I became the Commissioner which is the like the state surgeon general here. There they call it Commissioner. And did that job for four years. The administration, the Democratic administration of Governor Malloy ended and the new Governor asked me to stay – I wanted to stay in the job but he had another person in mind for the job. That was his right to make an appointment, but they asked me to stay from January until that person could come. And I knew that that was a possibility so I had interviewed in Miami for the health director. They assigned it to another person but the state of Florida called me about this same time that things were happening and say, listen, Miami was given to another person but a position has opened in Orlando. If you are interested, we would like you to come to Orlando. And that's how it happened.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And you came to Orlando when?

DR. PINO: I arrived in Orlando May 10, 19 – 2019. My first day at work was on the 20th of May, 2019 and the first meeting for the pandemic was in December of that year.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So you had a few months that were not pandemic related.

DR. PINO: I don't remember but yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So how did the pandemic shape your job after you got here?

DR. PINO: I haven't done anything but pandemic in the last probably almost two years.

It had changed everything. So I want people to understand this part that I'm going to say because it is – you have to – for me to be able to say this, I want everyone to understand what I'm going to say, they need to for a moment extract everything negative that the pandemic has which is everything. But what the pandemic has done for me and my job, it has given me the ability to meet everyone in this community in a very short time, and that's the goal in this type of job. Because when you come new to a place, where you know no one, part of being able to do your job is being able to know whom to work with. At this level, whom to work with. And I will not know you, I will not know Kelly, I will not know many people that otherwise I have become in contact with. So on that, that's how the pandemic – the pandemic really in my case, in my profession really speed up the process that could have taken ten years. But it has a lot of negative consequences to our community at large, so I probably would have preferred to spend the ten years trying to know people than having this marathon in a year and a half.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: The pandemic has been stressful for a lot of people, probably particularly so for you being in the position that you're in. How do you handle that stress?

DR. PINO: I am starting to feel it. I actually was thinking just that I need to take some time off, not only for the time off itself, but off – off and disconnect. It has been difficult to sleep. Last night was a difficult night because your mind doesn't stop. You're always wondering what I have not done that I could do, how better to deliver this message and the pandemic has not stopped the other part of the job, you know, the department has 600 employees

and everything else that we do. So it's really another total and completely on top of the job that you normally have to do.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: I didn't realize that the Orange County Department of Health had 600 employees.

DR. PINO: 537.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Wow. So what is – what does your department do when it doesn't have to deal with the pandemic?

DR. PINO: So many things. And I still don't know everything. And these institutions -- and probably happened here, these bureaucratic institutions, to call it somehow institutions -- they are built over time and they do, and do, and do, and do, and do, and do more. So we have – we do for environmental health where we inspect tattoo parlors and piercing, septic system and that type of approach to keep the environment safe and healthy for everyone who live in it. Including radioactive materials for some institutions. We do inspections. We do nuisance complaints in that area. We inspect well waters.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Wow.

DR. PINO: We inspect community centers, and some day cares, and sometimes some schools and sometimes some clinical spaces. We also do all the emergency preparedness and response that you have seen through the pandemic. That's a big area of the department. We are also different than many other health departments, we do have clinical services. We have two maternity health clinics that do prenatal care and they also do family planning. We also have a large HIV clinic that sees 2,000 patients in Orange County that are HIV positive, our clients. We have an STD clinic that see you know many cases of transmittal – sexually transmittal diseases.

And on top of that, we also have a TB clinic that see all our cases of TB around the county and sometimes from other counties. What else we do? We have family planning. We also have Healthy Start, which we visit families that are expecting a child, to have the best conditions for the child and keep the pregnancy healthy. We also have a program that has 50,000 clients providing nutritional services to our clients. And a lot of things.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Wow. That's a lot of things to keep – a lot of balls to keep in the air.

DR. PINO: And they are all there.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Yeah. So what was – how was the city different than you thought it would be and have you enjoyed being here? Because we've enjoyed having you.

DR. PINO: I absolutely love the area. I never liked Miami, although I'm Cuban. It's very crowded, feels compacted. It feels dense. And I love to go to Miami for vacation. I love to go for a weekend, but I get tired very quick of being there. It's overwhelming. That's interesting because it doesn't happen in New York, but anyway, Orlando have this feeling of openness. Buildings are not tall. Avenues are wide and open. So you have this feeling of freedom, I guess you can say. I also – there are so many things to do around here that you never run out of anything to do. You can book a yacht today; you can go to a park next week. You can go hiking one day. You can go to a lake. There's so, so many activities. But the area has been very welcoming to me. It has not been an easy process to adapt to it but the COVID-19 also broke all those barriers and forced me to just, you have to do it. But it was difficult at the beginning. It was not an easy transition, and remember, I always wanted to stay in the other job.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Right.

DR. PINO: So in that sense you come with a sense of defeat when you lose your job.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Right.

DR. PINO: For whatever reason. In this case, a political transition, and I knew that could happen so it was not a surprise. But it always hurts. It always hurts.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what was – what was difficult about the transition? I know one of the things has got to be the weather because it's a lot hotter down here than it is in Connecticut.

DR. PINO: So one it was positive, but the humidity was interesting. Coming from Cuba

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Is Cuba not this humid?

DR. PINO: I don't think so. I don't remember. I think that because it's a small island, very narrow, we get a lot of breeze. Florida, especially Central Florida, with this many lakes, it feels like boiling water sometimes when it gets really humid, but I love the rain in the afternoon. Love going to the beaches around here. But they, not knowing anyone, I knew no one, that was difficult. The first few was just driving around like a ghost, I guess, not knowing anything. But it's so good now to know where you have to exit, to have a sense of orientation. Working at the Convention Center for months give me – also force me to go in that area of town that I normally would not go and learn even how beautiful Orlando is in all those areas. It's just – Orlando is growing so fast.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: It is growing very fast and we do call it the City Beautiful. I mean a lot of green spaces.

DR. PINO: Absolutely beautiful. Orlando – and the more you go into the city, you realize there are two. Basically Orlando that everyone knows the parks and around the world, and then there is this smaller Orlando, you know, Eola Park, everything that happens, Thornton Park, or College Park and they are such a beautiful areas when Orlando was a small town and they still preserve. You get that feeling of a small town even though you are in an area that has 1.5 million people.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, I certainly hope you feel welcome in the community at this stage.

DR. PINO: I do. I do feel very welcome.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, Dr. Pino, thank you very much for sharing your story with me. It's fascinating and I think literally we could talk for hours about what you experienced in Cuba because I find it fascinating.

DR. PINO: Yes, thank you.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: But thank you for being here with me today.

DR. PINO: Absolutely, thank you for giving me this opportunity.

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 at ninthcircuitfl for updates on new episodes and subscribe to Open Ninth on your favorite podcast service.

(Music)