

RAISING THE BAR

A CONVERSATION WITH THE 2021 HBACF PRESIDENT

FEATURING LAURA SANCHEZ

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(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. I’m here today with Laura Sanchez, current president of the Hispanic Bar Association of Central Florida. A former volunteer for the Legal Aid Society of the Orange County Bar Association, Laura currently holds the position of their community, economic development and sealing and expungement attorney. She closely works with the society’s community outreach programs and is in charge of the tax clinics that help low income tax payers receive the assistance and representation they deserve. I’m thrilled to have you in the studio today, Laura. Thanks for joining me.

MS. SANCHEZ: Thank you so much. It’s an honor to be here today. Thank you for having me.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: You are welcome. So tell me a little bit about yourself. Where were you born and where did you grow up?

MS. SANCHEZ: I was actually born in Cuba. I came to Miami in 1995. I was five at the time. I know I probably told you my age now but I lived in south Florida almost my entire life and I came up to Orlando in 2014 for law school and I decided to stay here.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what was it like transitioning from Cuba to south Florida when you were so young?

MS. SANCHEZ: It was difficult. I didn't know the language. My first language is Spanish so to me it was a little bit hard especially going to school, starting I didn't know anyone. We didn't have any family here. It was just me, my mom, and my dad so it was a little hard for me to adapt. Thank God I picked everything up pretty quickly so by the time I was six or seven, I started to learn English and it was good but it was a little bit hard at first for sure.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: I would assume if you came from Cuba at five with your parents, your parents probably also spoke Spanish primarily.

MS. SANCHEZ: Yes, and they still do. My dad was a little bit, I guess more lenient to learning the language. My mom didn't really learn it that well anymore. She speaks a little bit of it but predominately it's just Spanish what they speak.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what drew you to the law?

MS. SANCHEZ: It's a funny story. So when I was young, I actually wanted to be a vet. I love animals –

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: I think we all want to be a vet when we're young.

MS. SANCHEZ: Yes. Yes. But I'm really queasy when it comes to like blood and needles and I knew that wasn't going to work out for me. So when I was about like nine or so, my dad and I, we always used to get into these arguments of you know why the dog should be able to sleep in my room, right. He was very big about no he has his bed. You don't need to have the dog in the room. So I would argue a point and he was like, you know what, that's pretty good. Maybe you should become an attorney. And from that point on I was like sure, why not and I loved it. So yeah, it's nice.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what was your first experience with the law before you went to college and law school?

MS. SANCHEZ: My mother. My parents got divorced when I was 13. My mom didn't really have a lot of resources. She was a stay at home mom so she never worked here. She didn't have a lot of money so when she was going to hire an attorney; she had to put everything on a credit card, right. And the language was a big thing. She only knew Spanish and I wish I knew more of the resources out there at the time for low-income individuals. So to me that was, you know, I feel like I'm meant to do something like this, help people that really can't do it on their own, I mean, can't afford to pay a few thousand dollars to get a divorce. To me that was really the breaking point where I'm like, you know what, I think this is for me and this is something that I want to do.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: In many cases, family cases and civil cases, if someone speaks another language, the court system in Florida does not provide an interpreter for them.

MS. SANCHEZ: Correct, yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Did you have to – any many times family members come in and interpret in family and civil cases.

MS. SANCHEZ: I did, yeah, and I didn't know anything. I mean, I was 13. I had no idea what the legal field was. I didn't know any of the terms, the procedures. So I did have to help her out with the translations and things like that, so it was hard. Especially a divorce, you don't want your child to be involved in that but she didn't have any choice so it was – it was hard, yeah, it was hard.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: All right. And did that cement your desire to go to law school when your mom went through this process?

MS. SANCHEZ: Yes, it definitely did. And not just to go to law school but to be more in community service and serve the low-income population. That was really my main goal of what I wanted to do. I mean, I'm glad I was able to do it, but yes, that was definitely the moment when I'm like, I need to go to law school and I need to do this.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So you moved up here from south Florida to go to law school.

MS. SANCHEZ: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And you went to which law school?

MS. SANCHEZ: Barry.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Barry.

MS. SANCHEZ: Yep, um-hum.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And what was it like transitioning at a pretty young age from south Florida to Orlando?

MS. SANCHEZ: It was my first time living alone so that was weird. I never had to pay rent when I was home so it was kind of a reality check. You know, you have to pay rent, phone, water and honestly, the people were way nicer here. The traffic was better, believe it or not. Miami traffic is insane.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Traffic here is bad enough.

MS. SANCHEZ: Yes, yes. So it's worse. It's really bad. And I remember one time somebody opened the door for me. I was like, oh, my God, that's so nice. South Florida you don't really see a lot of that. People are more on the go, go, go. I feel like here it's a little bit more calm, relaxing and people are just very nice. So I think that's why I stayed instead of going back.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So law school takes three years.

MS. SANCHEZ: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Okay. And while you were in law school, did you do some volunteer work?

MS. SANCHEZ: I did. I did. My second year of law school, I actually had an internship with the Legal Aid Society. I did a lot of their intake calls and community outreach. And then I got involved with taxes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: All right. Before we get there, our listeners may not know what the Legal Aid Society is. Can you tell me what that is?

MS. SANCHEZ: Yes. We are a nonprofit law firm. We're in downtown Orlando. So we handle all kinds of cases, civil. We do family law, immigration, consumer, housing which is huge right now. And we do handle a few of guardianship cases as well. And we have a GAL program for kids in the dependency system and it's focused on low-income individuals that cannot afford an attorney, and we provide one for them.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: All right. And it's a branch of the Orange County Bar Association?

MS. SANCHEZ: Yes, correct.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Another voluntary bar?

MS. SANCHEZ: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Okay. And I know that a lot of people don't know about free legal services in the community. Is the Legal Aid Society large enough to handle – to give everyone that would qualify free legal services?

MS. SANCHEZ: So it depends on the cases. Unfortunately not everybody. We focus more on the Orange County area. If we can't help someone, we always have a referral sheet so we send them out to either the Legal Aids in Seminole or Osceola. And if it's a case that we can't handle, we have a system where we would send them somewhere where it's also free or very, very low cost as well.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Yeah, I know that there's just not enough free legal services to meet the demand out there in the community.

MS. SANCHEZ: There's not, yes. Correct.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So I would assume that the Legal Aid Society has to triage really, to pick and choose which cases that they can put resources into.

MS. SANCHEZ: Correct. And we really, especially with family law, we really focus on individuals that have been victims of domestic violence, that have children. That's one of our main focus and immigration. A lot of individuals that have been victims of crime. It's a big thing for us. So we focus on the serious things. If there's someone that doesn't have children or that's not a victim of domestic violence, we have someone that we can send them to as well. So

we have a lot of community partners that either are free or low cost, so we always have somewhere to send them. We would never just leave them there, you know, without a resource.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So when you're in law school, in your second year, you started volunteering at the Legal Aid Society. What did you do for them?

MS. SANCHEZ: So I did a lot of the community outreach by intake calls. I would take calls and do the applications, and there used to be an attorney there. She's no longer with us, Cathy Tucker. She passed away a little while ago. She was a mentor. She was amazing. She was in charge of the tax clinic and she got me involved. She's like, hey, you want to try it and see if you like it? So after the semester that I was there for the internship, I stayed. I stayed for free. I just stayed. I'm like, you know, I just want to help. I want to volunteer and now I took over the program after she passed away, and to me I always remember this one story. My first day doing taxes, there was an older woman, I did her return. And she was getting like \$1,000 back and she started crying in my office. And I didn't understand why she was crying. I'm like, oh, my God, did I say something wrong. And she looked at me, like, thank you so much, I can buy my grandson a Christmas gift. And that was February. That to me was amazing, the fact that I could do that for someone and help them. So that's when I decided, I'm going to stay here. I'm going to stay here. I'm going to volunteer and I learned so much there. It's amazing. It was an amazing experience and it still is.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So you volunteered your third year in law school as well.

MS. SANCHEZ: Correct, yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And then I would assume you graduated from law school since you're a lawyer now.

MS. SAHCHEZ: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And passed the bar. After you did that, did you begin working full time at the Legal Aid Society?

MS. SANCHEZ: Yes. So I continued volunteering. I was actually working at another firm while I was studying for the bar exam, and they called me and said, hey, look, we have a position open. Even if you haven't taken the test yet, we would still want you to do this and then we can keep you on if you want to. So I did a lot of the community stuff for Hurricane Maria. We had a program so we focused on that and I did a lot of that work and then after that was over, they told me, do you want to stay? I'm like, sure, so I started doing intake.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what did you do – what legal work needed to be done for Hurricane Maria?

MS. SANCHEZ: Everything. I feel like it was everything. Specifically housing, so we had a lot of people that came over and they had family here. And they would have their relatives, and you know, I don't know if you know a lot about the Hispanics –

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And they came from Puerto Rico?

MS. SANCHEZ: Yes. Yes, exactly. It was – Hispanic families are very inclined to help. They want to bring everybody over, stay, and landlords weren't very happy about that at the time. They weren't on the lease so we had a lot of those cases. We had a lot of people that needed resources, food, clothes, everything. So we partnered up with a lot of the communities and lot of different organizations to help them with food. Help them get clothes, so it was everything. Everything you'd want. I know we couldn't provide that for them but we could always send them somewhere where they could get it.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So you stayed on at the Legal Aid Society after that.

MS. SANCHEZ: Yes. Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And what are your current duties there?

MS. SANCHEZ: A lot. I have a lot of hats, I always say. I do all of the community outreach. I handle a little bit of immigration. I do the taxes, sealing and expungement. And then I just started doing a little bit of guardian advocacy cases as well. It's fun.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: All right. So we've talked about taxes. We haven't talked about sealing and expungement, and that deals with criminal cases.

MS. SANCHEZ: Correct.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Can you tell me a little bit about that?

MS. SANCHEZ: So the process itself is not a criminal process, it's civil. And we pretty much help a lot of people get their records expunged. So I know in Florida, you only do one record so you can only do one. And we have a lot of people that come in that have a juvenile charge, and things that they did in the past. I feel like well, we're young, we always do something, right. There's something that happens and it gives people a second chance, either for housing or for work. We've had –

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: It basically takes it off their record so people can't see it.

MS. SANCHEZ: Yes. Correct. Correct. There's a few exceptions, you know, especially the government. They can always see it even if it's sealed or expunged, but yes, it takes it off their record so they're able to get a job. They're able to get housing, so it's really important.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And you continued your community service while you've been at the Legal Aid Society by –

MS. SANCHEZ: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: -- becoming involved in the Hispanic Bar Association?

MS. SANCHEZ: Correct.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So tell me, the Hispanic Bar Association is a voluntary bar.

MS. SANCHEZ: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So tell me what are voluntary bars? And why are they appropriate – why are they important?

MS. SANCHEZ: For me, so I know the voluntary bar is really the main focus is for networking, right. You have all the attorneys from everywhere. They network. They go to events. From my years specifically, I also wanted to include a lot of community outreach and community service. It's very important to me obviously, especially with my background. I really wanted to go out into the community and help or teach a little bit of the law to people who don't know. So we actually hosted an event called Conoce Tus Derechos, which is know your rights. And we did a housing panel, so we would describe everything that had to do with the CDC orders, evictions here in Florida. We had a whole panel of attorneys that would assist with that. And we also wanted to give back to students. So we have a mentorship program right now that we're doing with UCF Legal Studies program. So we're pairing them up with attorneys who might help them even get into law school. Tell them how the exams are; guide them into something that they would want to do. So for me it was really big to give back as well as just the

networking thing. And I think that's important. I think that's one of the things that we should all be doing now.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: The Hispanic Bar Association focuses on providing services to the Hispanic community, correct?

MS. SANCHEZ: Correct. But you don't have to be Hispanic.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: That's what I was –

MS. SANCHEZ: It could be everybody.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And you don't have to be a Hispanic attorney to be –

MS. SANCHEZ: No.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: -- a member?

MS. SANCHEZ: No. Definitely not. We take everyone from everywhere, paralegals and law students, attorneys and judges, everyone, yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what made you – you have been elected president. Before that, you were the treasurer.

MS. SANCHEZ: Yes, I was.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And what made you want to be president of the Hispanic Bar Association?

MS. SANCHEZ: If I'm going to be honest, I never thought about it at first. I'm not a very – how do you say, a very outgoing person. I'm more shy. I didn't really know if I could do it, but I tried. I'm like, you know, let me get out there. I know that I could do something good

and when they offered it to me, they're like, I think you'll be great at doing this. You know what, sure, so I just say yes, but I never thought about it before. It just kind of happened for me so it was nice.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So you became president in the midst of the pandemic.

MS. SANCHEZ: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Which has certainly changed our community and changed our legal community as well.

MS. SANCHEZ: Correct, yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: What are your plans as president of the Hispanic Bar Association?

MS. SANCHEZ: I think right now obviously safety is a big thing. Everything we've been doing for the last year and a half has been on Zoom, on virtual platforms. We just had our first in person event last week, so we're really trying to possibly go back into in person events but I don't know if that's a possibility, especially now since all the cases are spiking. But I really want to focus on the community as well. As I said, I really want to give back so I'm trying to do another Conoce Tus Derechos when it comes to immigration. I know that's a big thing now as well with all the TPS changes in the law. So I think that's really important so I want to continue doing that and hopefully I can do another one before my time is up.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So you – the term of the president at the Hispanic Bar is only a year, right?

MS. SANCHEZ: Yes, correct.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So you have to hit the ground running and get a lot accomplished in your year.

MS. SANCHEZ: Yes. I feel like right now I'm just getting used to everything and then in a few months, I'm like, okay, I got to go.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: But you've – you're not only busy in your professional life, it seems as if you've been pretty busy during your personal life.

MS. SANCHEZ: Yes, I have.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And you got married right before the pandemic.

MS. SANCHEZ: I did in February last year, yes. We got very lucky.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: That was fortuitous because you know, you were able to have a crowd.

MS. SANCHEZ: Yes, it was right before everything shut down and we were able to go on our honeymoon as well, and when we got back a week later, everything was closed. So yeah, it was very nice. I love it.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So how have you found it navigating the pandemic both you know, in your personal life and professionally?

MS. SANCHEZ: So in my professional life, I've actually found it simpler. We've been working from home a lot, which I love. I feel like I get a lot more done and I think we've all realized that we can do a lot of things on a virtual platform. You know, we don't need to be in person to be able to do hearings or be able to speak to clients. So that's been good. Personal life is great. When we're both working from home, I have to push him to the side, I'm like, I'm

trying to do like a conference call. Please don't talk so that's been a little bit I guess of an adjustment. Especially the first year of marriage –

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Right.

MS. SANCHEZ: It's nice but it's been a little bit of a challenge when he has a call and I have a call and we're in the same house and we're trying to get that done.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: It's a lot of togetherness.

MS. SANCHEZ: Yes, a lot of togetherness. I told him, like, you're lucky I love you so much because I don't know if I could do this.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: I can tell you one thing that I've noticed during the pandemic, and I don't know if you've noticed, a lot more people, ordinary people, working people are attending their hearings because the hearings are virtual.

MS. SANCHEZ: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And they don't have to miss a day of work, come down and pay for parking and navigate this big building. Have you found that to be the case?

MS. SANCHEZ: Yes, definitely. And I think a lot of attorneys too love that. They don't have to drive to the courthouse, pay for parking. For our clients, they're low income. It takes a lot for them to come here. Sometimes they don't have a car, so they have to have someone drop them off. They have to take time off work so that's time that they're not putting into make something of a living, right. So yes, it's been great where they can just pop on for a couple of minutes, do their thing and come right back out and go to work. So it's great, yes. I've definitely seen that a lot.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And yeah, I think the virtual platforms are here to stay.

MS. SANCHEZ: I think so too.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Because I think a lot of people are finding them to be very efficient and they really haven't had an impact on the quality of legal representation during the hearing.

MS. SANCHEZ: No, I honestly, at least from my firm, we have done more when it's a virtual platform than in person. I mean, we're still going. We're still helping the community. We're still doing community events on Zoom so it hasn't stopped us at all on that front.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, to wrap up, I'll let you give a plug for the Hispanic Bar Association. Is there anything else that you would like our listeners to know or perhaps a way that they can join the Hispanic Bar Association or learn more about it if they're interested in knowing about it?

MS. SANCHEZ: Yes, we are doing a CLE on August 24th at 11:00 a.m. It's going to be for housing so all the new updates and everything that's been going on. And we're bringing back our domino tournament in October, October 21st in person, hopefully. We're very excited. If you want to learn more about that, you can reach us at our Facebook group at Hispanic Bar Association of Central Florida.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, Laura, thank you for joining me here today and thank you for telling me about the Legal Aid Society and the Hispanic Bar Association.

MS. SANCHEZ: Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure. Thank you so much.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: You're welcome.

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.

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