

OPEN NINTH:

CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM

RAISING THE BAR

A CONVERSATION WITH THE 2021

CFAWL PRESIDENT HEATHER MEGLINO

EPISODE 140

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. I’m here today with Heather Meglino, the President of Central Florida Association for Women Lawyers. Heather owns her own firm, Meglino Law where she specializes in business and employment law. She also serves as in-house counsel for multiple companies, including Quality One Wireless, a local female and minority owned business. I’m thrilled to have you in the studio today, Heather. Thanks for joining me.

MS. MEGLINO: Thank you. I’m honored to be here. Thanks for having me.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So tell me about yourself. Where did you grow up?

MS. MEGLINO: So I tend to say that I grew up in Tampa, Florida, although as a child I lived in different states and we moved all over the place but I tend to say that Tampa was home even though I didn’t – I wasn’t born there.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So why did you move a lot when you were a child?

MS. MEGLINO: It really was my dad’s work. He worked in the marine and sand blasting industry so we would kind of go from coast to coast. So we lived in Jacksonville and Oregon, and Louisiana, and I was actually born in South Carolina.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Oh, wow. So what – tell me about your educational background. You're obviously a lawyer. So what drew you to that?

MS. MEGLINO: Yeah, so I really decided that I wanted to be a lawyer in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, which sounds crazy --

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Wow.

MS. MEGLINO: -- to a lot of people. But we lived next to Stetson Law School. We lived very close to the law school and I did a project when I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade on lawyers. I'd really never been exposed to lawyers until that project and I said, you know what, this is something that I want to do. And later on, I actually – I was really interested in business as well so I would end up getting a degree in business although I fully intended to go to law school at the time.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So you set your sights on being a lawyer. You started college. You got your business administration degree.

MS. MEGLINO: Yep.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: I did the same thing. And then you went to law school. Where did you go to law school?

MS. MEGLINO: So that is what actually brought me here to Orlando. I came over here in 2008 to attend Barry Law School. And for me it was – you know, it was still close to home but I was getting out of the place where I'd grown up and I had gone to undergrad. And I really thought that I would go right back to Tampa after law school, but I just – I fell in love with Orlando and the legal community here.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So after you graduated from law school, what did you do next? Did you get a job at a law firm?

MS. MEGLINO: Yes. So I like many of the law students coming out in 2011, I started in foreclosures working for foreclosures for the banks and that really got me my courtroom experience. And eventually I would find myself to labor and employment law. And I really loved labor and employment law. I was defending businesses only. And I felt very connected to that particular area because growing up, this is something of course you realize later on, but growing up my father owned his own business. And so I very much related to the struggles that he would go through as a business owner. And so I started just kind of building my practice around defending businesses, whether it was contract disputes or labor and employment law, and then eventually I would open up my own law firm, Meglino Law. And I've since closed that law firm to join Quality One Wireless.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So when you're representing businesses in labor and employment lawsuits, are those lawsuits where perhaps an employee has sued the company because they got discharged from work?

MS. MEGLINO: That's correct. So it could be harassment, discrimination, wrongful termination, failure to pay overtime, minimum wages. So many, although not all, were in Federal court.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So you opened your own law firm. How long did you have your law firm before you started working for Quality One?

MS. MEGLINO: For about three years and then I just recently joined Quality One Wireless in March of this year.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And you're general counsel for Quality One?

MS. MEGLINO: That's correct. Quality One Wireless as well as several other entities. Once Upon A Coconut, it's a coconut beverage company. BC Rich Guitars, it's a guitar company. So it really gives the meaning to general counsel. I get to do a lot of really cool things at work.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So why did you make the jump from being a lawyer that litigates in court to a lawyer that spends most of their time counseling a business as general counsel?

MS. MEGLINO: You know I felt that it was really the same. That is what I did at Meglino Law. I really just counseled multiple small businesses that couldn't necessarily afford to have a full time general counsel. So I was essentially their outside general counsel and so I think my dream was always to be in-house, to be honest. It was always a goal in mind but I knew that I needed to get enough experience, especially that litigation experience. So that way I could handle fully you know whatever comes across the desk in house.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what attracted you to Quality One Wireless?

MS. MEGLINO: You know honestly, it was the people and the support of their involvement with the community. So if you look us up, you know, we do a large variety of community service work. They spend a lot of time and effort in the leadership. So for example, you know, we bring in speakers from all over the country to Quality One Wireless. And I just think that that is so important that I could continue to enhance my skills as a leader and I could learn from those around me. And I could also be supported in all of the community service and the voluntary bar work that I do.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, speaking of community service, I understand that you volunteer in some charities such as Make-a-Wish Foundation. What drew you to do that?

MS. MEGLINO: So Make-a-Wish actually – my connection with them started when I was in college. My sorority, Chi Omega was affiliated with Make-a-Wish. So we could put on charity events to help grant a wish for a child. And actually after I moved here and I had just finished taking the bar exam, if we could remember to that time of just uncertainty and you know, did I pass, did I not? What was going to be next? Was I going to get a job? And I was really feeling down and thought that that was a little ridiculous. And so I decided to sign up to become a wish grantor. So I went through the training. A wish grantor is really the person who goes out and meets with the families and helps determine what a child's wish is, and they help grant that wish. So I was just so drawn into that organization. I mean, it truly is really good work that they do. And I also sit on the board of the Harbor House of Central Florida as well. So another great organization.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So I'm sure you have lots of memorable moments as a wish grantor. Is there one that just jumps into your mind when you say the word wish grantor?

MS. MEGLINO: I think what stands out to me the most is you know, one is just overall when you're meeting with these children who are going through these, you know, just horrific, horrific medical conditions and treatments and surgeries, it's just you know their outlook and their attitude. And you know just the little moments of how excited they are to receive their wish. That always stood out to me as well as the fact that some of them were just simple, simple wishes. You know, I wish to go to Chuck E Cheese, you know, something very – you know, to us we're thinking you could have one wish and it can be anything. And it may be you know, I wish that my family has a vehicle, you know, those are the ones that really touch me. It's like,

you know, you're asking a child to come up with whatever they want. And it may be something so simple as going to Chuck E Cheese, or you know, now it's Monkey Joes and whatever else it may be now. But that always stood out to me.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: You also mentioned that you are on the board of Harbor House. What is Harbor House?

MS. MEGLINO: Yeah, so Harbor House of Central Florida provides protection to those who are really survivors of domestic abuse, and they have an amazing crisis hot line. There is a shelter that provides a whole array of services. What's really neat about Harbor House is, you know, it really provides protection for the entire family. So for example, a mother and all of her children as well as their pets, which is a little bit different than a lot of the shelter houses. And so they provide all kinds of services as well as helping make sure that really those survivors of domestic violence are also transitioned back once they are out of shelter as well.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: I remember when Harbor House was doing its campaign raise – their fund raising for the shelter for the pets. And at first it was something that I really didn't understand until it was explained to me. Many survivors of domestic abuse don't want to leave the house or leave the abuser because they can't take the dog with them, or the cat, or whatever it may be. And Harbor House saw that need and wanted to fill that need. So survivors of domestic abuse would feel safe leaving the house and being able to take the pet with them.

MS. MEGLINO: Yeah, that's correct. They saw that as just a huge barrier that, you know, women would not leave a situation of domestic violence because they did not want to leave their pet and so I just think that's truly remarkable of the services that they're able to provide for our Central Florida community.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And I believe that studies have shown in Harbor House, you know, indicated that women aren't – they don't want to leave the pet just because they're attached to the pet. They understand that the pet is in danger if they leave because the abuser could take out their anger on the pet as opposed to – you know, when the spouse or significant other isn't there.

MS. MEGLINO: Yeah, that's absolutely correct, and I think the studies show that often times animal abuse is how it first begins in many situation so again, just an amazing – amazing organization. I had the opportunity to kind of help start the young professional's board. I was chair of that board and now I sit on the Harbor House Board as well.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, we weren't – we're not here to talk about your other charity work. We're here to talk about the Central Florida Association for Women Lawyers. We like to affectionately call it CFAWL. And it is a voluntary bar association. Tell me what are voluntary bar associations.

MS. MEGLINO: Yeah, so voluntary bar associations, you know, here we're very lucky in Central Florida. We have a whole list of voluntary bar associations, many of which have particular missions in mind. So of course, we have, you know, the Hispanic Bar Association, for example. We have GOAABA, the Asian Bar Association. CFAWL, you know, really our mission is to promote women in the legal profession. And kind of a misconception when you hear Central Florida Association for Women Lawyers, you know, often times I get asked is it only women lawyers? And it's not. You know, we have male members. We have male members of the judiciary. We actually have a large population of male members. The idea is to support women in the legal profession. So that's why we always say, we're not of women lawyers. We are for women lawyers.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: In Florida, we have one mandatory bar and that's the Florida Bar Association that all Florida lawyers have to be a member of to practice law in Florida. But the voluntary bars you can choose to join if you wish, if you believe in their mission statement, or you can choose not to. Is – why do people join CFAWL in particular?

MS. MEGLINO: That's a great question. I think you know, and I've had experience in a number of different organizations here in Central Florida, you know, for example we have the Orange County Bar Association, which of course, you know, as a subsection of that is the Young Lawyers Section. You know, just a great amazing organization. I think that, you know, sometimes certain organizations can feel a little large or maybe intimidating. You know, often an Orange County Bar Association luncheon you know might be much larger in numbers when you attend a luncheon for example. So you know, CFAWL gives you a little bit smaller of a subclass for a group. I like to think that in CFAWL, everyone is so welcoming. You know, that is what really stood out to me. So I didn't mention this before but you know I came to know CFAWL when I was in law school. So that is when it all started, when I was a 2L in law school. And what stood out to me about CFAWL was just how willing everyone was to help. I never felt alone. I felt like I could always you know get the questions that I needed answered. I always had somebody to call on, so many great natural mentoring relationships have come out of CFAWL. And I like to think that you know, that along with our really fun, exciting programming that's a little bit different maybe from some other organizations is what keeps people coming back to CFAWL.

CHIEF JUDGE MUINYON: So you've been involved in CFAWL for a long time.

MS. MEGLINO: Over ten years now.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what made you want to become president?

MS. MEGLINO: Such a great question. And you know when I look back on my time in CFAWL, I think that there were certain years you know, early on, where I thought this is – I want to be president of this organization. And maybe certain years I thought, I don't know if I could do that, right, or you know, you make excuses. I'm not at a large national firm or whatever it maybe. But what really made me want to do it is kind of two-fold. First, those who came before me. You know, if you look up and you can – anyone can do this on CFAWL.org, you can look at our long list of past presidents, some of the most amazing leaders that we have in our community, and these leaders have led not just CFAWL, but they have either come from other organizations where they've led, or they've gone on from CFAWL to do amazing things in our community. And so I think it was just the fascination with everyone who had come before me and I also felt this just need to give back. I felt like in the years over a decade in CFAWL I personally and professionally have gotten so much out of CFAWL, it only felt right to give that back to the organization.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: CFAWL over the years has had a number of programs and those programs have some longevity. Could you describe some of those programs that CFAWL engages in?

MS. MEGLINO: Absolutely. So one that is going on right now would be our backpack project. That's where we partner with the Young Lawyers Section of the Orange County Bar Association and we raise funds as well as school supplies for students. It's often Rock Lake Elementary to make sure that every student going back to school has a book pack and full of supplies. We also supply school supplies to the teachers there as well. That has just been a long-standing partnership that we've had, very successful. We also have – many have heard of our

programming, which is now honestly repeated throughout the state of Florida, which are Table for Eight. That is where a CFAWL member will host a small group. We say eight to ten individuals. They often have themes, you know, whether it's ugly sweater or we might have an Olympic themed Table for Eight. You know, that was one way that I got connected as a law student was attending a Table for Eight. It's a small intimate, usually a dinner or lunch setting, so it allows you to feel like you really get to know those individuals that attend that table. And that way the next time you go to a larger event or larger luncheon, you know, you know, you feel like you've really connected with some individuals. So those – we also put on an amazing judicial reception which we plan to go again this November.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what are your plans as president? Do you have any themes for this year that you want to share with people?

MS. MEGLINO: We do. And that is really the kind of neat part I think about, you know, being president. It's just looking at the year. It's kind of become this little tradition in CFAWL that the president will roll out this theme for the year, if you will. And so this year our theme is CFAWL, We Got This. So very simple. It's a theme about overcoming obstacles, being resilient. And I think that that just speaks to what our members have gone through the last year and a half, what we're still going through, and what we will go through, right. It's overcoming those obstacles together and that is, you know, I call it the intangible of what voluntary bar associations provide. Yes, they provide networking and business opportunities. They provide awesome programming, but the intangible is that love, support, community. So no one feels like they're navigating a very difficult profession by themselves. And I think that that's what voluntary bar associations really offer their members.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: It sounds like you're offering members the ability to juggle their work life and their personal life and provide them tools, both to help them professionally and to help them personally. Would I be right about that?

MS. MEGLINO: That's absolutely correct. And so you know we know that you know, yes, supporting women lawyers. Women lawyers often are the ones that take on the burden of managing a household as well as a profession. I think studies have shown also you know, women leaving the profession after having children and so, you know, that's what we're there to do. We're there to provide support to our women lawyers in particular so that way, you know, they feel that they always have a community to call on, you know, for whatever it may – whatever they may need. That could be professionally or personally. So for example, we had a counsel – last year we had a counsel of moms is what we called it, and just so that way, you know, our CFAWL members that were mothers could call upon each other. Maybe they needed help picking up someone from a doctor's appointment or getting cupcakes to an event, or whatever it may be. That's what we're there to provide for them.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Is there anything else that you want to tell our listeners about what CFAWL means to you or to this community?

MS. MEGLINO: That's a good one. You know, I – you know I said this in my CFAWL speech. No one is immune to going through difficult times. We will all go through difficult times at different phases. You know, many will see you know COVID itself. This is a difficult time for many. And so you know, CFAWL has just been there for me time and time after again and picked me up when I was down. You know, shortly weeks before my swearing in, I had two surgeries. I had melanoma cancer in my leg. You know, here I am about to take on a huge role to lead this organization and instead of leading, you know, I'm at a point where I need help from

all of my board, and all of my leadership team to help support me and encourage me. And so I just find it so fascinating that, you know, even though I'm stepping into the role as president, how much I still needed my CFAWL community and my CFAWL team. So you know I would just encourage anyone who maybe isn't a member or hasn't joined any voluntary bar associations to just join, you know, try – join a few if you're able to financially. Try them out for a year and then see, you know, see what group that you connect with. I wouldn't be a good president if I didn't say you know join CFAWL. You can join at CFAWL.org. We have different membership levels. For example, there's a government and non-profit membership level. There's a level for law students. Of course, as a law student you usually get the cheapest membership rate. So I say join them all when you're a 3L, you know, that way you take advantage of those good rates and see what you're connected to. Give us a try.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And CFAWL has monthly luncheons to connect everybody and those luncheons right now are in person, correct?

MS. MEGLINO: That's correct. So of course, as of recently we've moved to a hybrid format allowing small groups if they would like to come in person, but we're still offering them on Zoom as well. They're usually the first Friday of every month unless we are partnering with another organization or it falls on a holiday. So in September we'll have a joint luncheon with the Young Lawyers Section. In October, we'll have a joint luncheon with the Orange County Bar Association.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, that sounds exciting and I look forward to seeing you at those luncheons. Thank you so much for joining me today and telling me about CFAWL.

MS. MEGLINO: Thanks for having me. I am truly humbled to be here.

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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