

OPEN NINTH:

CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM

RE-RELEASE: A LEGAL PIONEER

FEATURING FORMER CHIEF JUDGE BELVIN PERRY, JR.

EPISODE 169

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HOSTED BY: CHIEF JUDGE LISA T. 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 practicing attorney and former Chief Judge of the Ninth Judicial Circuit, Belvin Perry. An accomplished lawyer, he was a prosecutor with the State Attorney’s Office where he served as the chief of the felony division, the chief of the criminal intake division and the chief assistant state attorney, a position he held until 1989 when he became the first African-American to join the bench at the Ninth Judicial Circuit through the election process. Belvin served as Chief Judge for nine terms, and gained national acclaim as the presiding judge for the Casey Anthony trial. He is also my long-time friend and mentor. I am thrilled to have him here in the studio today. Thanks for joining me, Belvin.

MR. PERRY: And thanks for having me, Judge Munyon, soon to be and if not Chief Judge Munyon.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So I know a lot about you because we’ve known each other for decades. You were my first boss at the State Attorney’s Office so I’m going to ask you a lot of questions. So I hope you’re here with me for a while. You grew up in Orlando. You are a native Orlandoan. That’s pretty rare. So I want to find out all about that. What was it like growing up in Orlando?

MR. PERRY: I was born in Orlando in 1949.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So that was pre-Disney.

MR. PERRY: That was long before Disney. I was born at home on what was Holden Street, which is now Anderson Street. My mom was an elementary school teacher. And my dad along with Richard Arthur Jones, the two of them became the first two black police officers for the City of Orlando, going to work on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1951. So I grew up in the era of segregation. And my world was somewhat confined. But it was a world that exposed me to a lot of good things with my parents but also my community.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, having grown up with a dad who broke barriers as a police officer and a mom that was a teacher, how did they shape your life and your career?

MR. PERRY: A couple of ways. Number one, my parents always believed in the following principles: family, community service, faith, and hard work. And those were the things that shaped me and my siblings. Growing up, walking to Holden Street Elementary School, I could not walk three blocks without someone stopping me or saying I know your dad, you shouldn't be throwing rocks; you shouldn't be playing in the street, and things that kids would do on their way to school and back. My parents had this way of teaching excellence without really teaching it. They led by example. They taught perfection in everything that we would do at home, from your chores in terms of when you got out of bed, before you left your room, you had to make your bed and guess what, you did not get back in your bed again until it was time to go to sleep. And those little minor lessons of discipline, you know, helped shaped me.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: I think many of us in Central Florida and certainly, the younger people do not realize how close we are to a shameful history of segregation. How did that affect you growing up?

MR. PERRY: Well, I hate to say it, but that was your life, you were used to it. You were used to the white/colored bathrooms. You were used to the racial slurs that you would receive. You were used to, when you were in elementary school, we got to use hand-me-down books from the other schools. And sometimes there would be ugly things written in the books that were not very pleasant. You were used to living in your own little bubble. I can remember, you were instructed not to go to certain areas. I vividly remember downtown Orlando Woolworth's and the restaurant there at the lunch counter where they had the best-looking hotdogs and that grilled bun. And I used to walk by there when I was seven, eight years old and I wanted one of those so bad and I couldn't get one. And I was not able to get one until probably when I was in the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and that had to be the best tasting hotdog I ever had. You go to Kress Restaurant, what most folks don't know is, there were two sides to that Kress Restaurant, that building. There was a side that you would enter on Church and there was a side that you entered on Orange Avenue. The so-called colored entry was on Church Street, and if you went in that store, that was the way that you had to go into it. If you caught the bus, you had to sit on the back of the bus and if you accidentally sat below the line, you were scolded and there were certain N words that they would tell you. But you know that was life. That was the South. And that was the era that I grew up in.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: I'm sure with a mother as a teacher that you did well in school. Would I be right about that?

MR. PERRY: For the most part, yes, I did fine in school.