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OPEN NINTH:
CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM
CLIMBING KILIMANJARO
EPISODE 2
AUGUST 22, 2016
HOSTED BY: FREDERICK J. LAUTEN

1 (Music.)

2 >> Welcome to Episode 2 of "Open Ninth:
3 Conversations Beyond the Courtroom" in the Ninth Judicial
4 Circuit Court of Florida.

5 And now here's your host, Chief Judge Frederick J.
6 Lauten.

7 >> **JUDGE LAUTEN:** I'm here with my friend and colleague,
8 Circuit Judge Mark Blechman.

9 Mark, why don't you give a little biographical
10 information, how long have you been on the bench?

11 >> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** I'm in my fourth year, and I
12 initially was a criminal courts judge in Osceola County, and
13 now I'm in Orange County.

14 >> **JUDGE LAUTEN:** And how long did you practice law
15 before you became a judge?

16 >> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** I started with you in 1982. We were
17 both prosecutors at the State Attorney's Office, if I recall.
18 I did that for about five years, and then I was a defense
19 attorney for about 25 years.

20 >> **JUDGE LAUTEN:** So, Mark, I understand you had a
21 pretty interesting experience for your 50th birthday back
22 in 2008. Why don't you tell the listeners what it is you did
23 that was so unique.

24 >> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** I had read a book called "Into Thin
25 Air" by Jon Krakauer, and it got me interested in climbing.

1 And about the same time, my good friend, Judge Bob Wattles,
2 was diagnosed with lymphoma.

3 And at that time, as today, there is no cure for it, and
4 more and more people are being stricken with the cancer. And
5 I wanted to do something to raise awareness, both for the
6 disease and for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, so I
7 decided to climb Mount Kilimanjaro in honor of Bob Wattles
8 and try to draw attention and maybe get people working
9 towards a cure.

10 >> **JUDGE LAUTEN:** Well, that's an amazing tribute to an
11 amazing judge. For our listeners, why don't you tell us,
12 where is Mount Kilimanjaro?

13 >> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** I didn't know where it was
14 initially. And in reading the book, I, of course, looked up
15 where it is. I found out it's in Africa. It's actually the
16 tallest mountain, Fred, on the African continent. It's in
17 the country of Tanzania. Most people think it's in Kenya.
18 It's actually in Tanzania.

19 And it's also the largest free-standing mountain on the
20 planet. It's at 19,340 feet.

21 >> **JUDGE LAUTEN:** Well, why that mountain?

22 >> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** Well, in the book, it talks about
23 climbers that climb what's known as the "Seven Summits" or
24 seven peaks. And those are the tallest summits on each of
25 the seven continents.

1 In researching them, there was one that I could do and
2 six that I probably couldn't do, based upon my abilities, and
3 I chose Kilimanjaro as the one that I could do, since it's
4 more of a hike than it is a vertical climb.

5 **>> JUDGE LAUTEN:** Well, I imagine you can't just wake up
6 and climb up Mount Kilimanjaro. Tell us a little bit about
7 your training schedule and what it is you did to prepare for
8 this adventure.

9 **>> JUDGE BLECHMAN:** I actually trained about two years
10 in order to do it. I started by getting in shape to climb
11 where I put a backpack on and weighed it down with sometimes
12 80 pounds, sometimes 60 pounds, and climb a building we have
13 downtown here in Orlando that's exactly 20 stories. So we
14 would climb 200 stories up and down every other day for weeks
15 on end. Then we'd head out to Clermont where they have
16 hills, and we would hike 20 miles with backpacks.

17 Then we chose a mountain in Washington, which is known
18 as one of the more difficult mountains to climb, Mount
19 Rainier, and we climbed that one twice to get ready for
20 altitude climbing.

21 That mountain, Fred, requires both ice axes and crampons
22 because you're climbing a lot of vertical climbing. And
23 you're also tied to one another. So it was challenging to
24 get in shape, and I felt confident after all that that I
25 could do Kilimanjaro.

1 **>> JUDGE LAUTEN:** So vertical climbing sounds more
2 dangerous when you say it than climbing a trail. Tell us a
3 little bit about the dangers you face on Mount Rainier.

4 **>> JUDGE BLECHMAN:** On Mount Rainier, we were tied to
5 one another, climbing at night. Most of your summit
6 climbs -- in fact, every one I've been on, the dozen or so --
7 always you leave in the dark in order to avoid the sun
8 melting the ice and creating instability with the rocks.

9 So you're climbing at night with the headlight, and on
10 Rainier, we're tied to one another. My heartbeat at one
11 point was 220 beats per minute as I was climbing vertical,
12 tied to other people. So it was extremely dangerous.

13 The ice axe that we had was more of a device to keep
14 you, as you were falling off the mountain, to dig in and to
15 arrest your fall as opposed to the ice axe where you throw it
16 into the ice and pull yourself up.

17 **>> JUDGE LAUTEN:** Mark, earlier you kept saying "we"
18 when I asked you about training. So did you have a training
19 partner and a climbing partner?

20 **>> JUDGE BLECHMAN:** I did. All of my summits have been
21 with my good friend, he's an attorney in town, Carlos Payas.
22 And on the Kilimanjaro climb, there are actually seven
23 climbers, Carlos and myself, and then five others that just
24 joined in. They happened to be from the Pennsylvania area.
25 And seven years later, eight years later, we're still friends

1 based upon going through Kilimanjaro.

2 >> **JUDGE LAUTEN:** Yeah, that's great.

3 >> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** Yeah.

4 >> **JUDGE LAUTEN:** That's great.

5 So how long does it take to climb the highest single
6 mountain on the planet?

7 >> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** Well, it's -- that's a good
8 question. It takes different people different amounts of
9 time. There's a route called the Coca-Cola route. That's a
10 euphemism for what it is. And it's a 3-day climb or hike,
11 and that's got a very low percentage of success because you
12 have to acclimatize and get used to the altitude as you're
13 climbing.

14 We chose a route that was about five and a half days up
15 and one and a half days down. So it was a seven-day climb,
16 and that gave us more of a chance to acclimatize and have a
17 successful summit.

18 >> **JUDGE LAUTEN:** When you climb a mountain that high,
19 do you take oxygen tanks with you? Are you dependent on
20 oxygen being provided during the course of the climb?

21 >> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** Really good question. In the United
22 States mountains, we didn't have oxygen. They -- rainier is
23 14,000 and change. This being 19,000, our guides brought
24 along oxygen tanks just in case somebody needed it.

25 >> **JUDGE LAUTEN:** And you said it took five and a half

1 days to climb up?

2 >> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** It did.

3 >> **JUDGE LAUTEN:** One and a half days to come down.

4 What was harder? Was the ascent harder than the descent?

5 >> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** The descent was extremely difficult.

6 First, on the day of the summit, you wake up at midnight and

7 you start climbing. We climbed seven and a half hours from

8 our high camp at 17,000 feet up to the summit. We were there

9 for about an hour. That's as long as your brain can take it.

10 As soon as you get to that altitude, your brain is

11 dying from lack of oxygen. So we're there for an hour. The

12 lack of oxygen actually retarded us from being able to speak.

13 In order to speak, you would breathe in and your exhale would

14 be whatever words you could squeeze out because there wasn't

15 enough to speak. We were there, I would say, less than an

16 hour.

17 Then they brought us back down to our high camp at

18 17,000 feet. We got to sleep for two hours, and then we

19 hiked all the way down to 9,000 feet, all the same day, with

20 backpacks.

21 It had been snowing, which was unusual. And the snow

22 became rain as we got to lower altitudes. So we're

23 exhausted. We're walking downhill with backpacks, and that

24 was the second-most dangerous part of the climb.

25 >> **JUDGE LAUTEN:** So on the ascent, how many different

1 base camps or how many different camps were you at?

2 >> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** There were five different camps at
3 different altitudes. Some days you'd walk up to, let's say,
4 17,000 feet and come back down to 14,000 feet so your body
5 could -- it's called acclimatizing.

6 >> **JUDGE LAUTEN:** And you mentioned weather. Tell me a
7 little bit about the weather for your climb and whether you
8 had typical weather or unusual weather.

9 >> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** We had, at the summit, unusual
10 weather. The mountain, they say, makes its own weather. In
11 the lower altitudes, it's actually a rainforest. As you get
12 higher and are higher, you're literally above the clouds
13 where it's a desert environment and very arid.

14 When we got to our high camp at 17,000 feet, our tents
15 were covered with snow. And from that point on, we were in
16 snow, which is very unusual. And the photograph of me at the
17 top, you can see that I'm surrounded by snow where most of
18 the other photographs that I've ever seen -- in fact, all of
19 them -- just show the more rocky environment as opposed to
20 the beautiful fresh snow that we had.

21 >> **JUDGE LAUTEN:** So, Mark, you mentioned being at the
22 summit. You mentioned being there for about an hour. Tell
23 us what emotions you experienced when you were actually at
24 the summit.

25 >> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** It is one of the most emotional

1 moments of my life. And I think that's true for all of us
2 that made the summit.

3 First, it was emotional because we accomplished an
4 amazing goal. Second, I think a lack of oxygen assisted us
5 in becoming emotional.

6 But I had, in climbing this mountain, wanted to raise
7 awareness for Bob Wattles and what he was going through and
8 lymphoma. And one of the photographs I had taken was me
9 holding a shirt that said "cancer sucks" on it.

10 And our guide asked what that was about, and I tried to
11 explain it to him, but I was too emotional and I couldn't
12 speak. I had tears coming down my eyes, and I couldn't put
13 any words together. It was such an emotional experience
14 trying to imagine what Judge Wattles was going through and,
15 again, the emotion of achieving what I set out three years
16 before to do.

17 >> **JUDGE LAUTEN:** How dangerous is it to climb Mount
18 Kilimanjaro? Did you face many dangers?

19 >> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** I don't think it was a very
20 dangerous climb. It's more of a hike than a climb. As long
21 as you're prepared for it and your body can deal with it, I
22 don't think it's dangerous.

23 However, there is one part of it called the Great
24 Barranco Wall where you're scaling a 1,000-foot wall. And
25 that was dangerous for two reasons. One, it was three

1 days -- actually, four days into the hike, so you're somewhat
2 tired. Second of all, you're at a high altitude.

3 And the most dangerous part is you're jumping from rock
4 to rock as you're climbing up a thousand-foot wall with no
5 ropes. And if you fall, you're falling a long way with
6 nobody to help you.

7 So I think of all the days climbing Kilimanjaro, Fred,
8 that was the most dangerous and challenging day.

9 >> **JUDGE LAUTEN:** Did you have any close calls in your
10 group during this climb?

11 >> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** I don't recall any close calls. I
12 remember some of us not wanting to jump from rock to rock,
13 but there was no choice. You couldn't get down from there.

14 We got intestinal illnesses and as a result, one of us
15 wasn't able to summit, and it was pretty brutal on our
16 systems. And apparently everybody that reaches that altitude
17 has the same effect. But I don't think there were any close
18 calls as opposed to my Rainier climbs and my other climbs.

19 >> **JUDGE LAUTEN:** So would you say that altitude
20 sickness is the biggest issue to deal with?

21 >> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** Absolutely. And there's not much to
22 do. If your body can't deal with it, there's nothing you can
23 do about it. We live at sea level here, Fred, and the best I
24 could do was climb staircases. The people that went with us,
25 one lived in Wyoming. He had altitude sickness to the same

1 degree I did, so it's just a matter of what the individual
2 body can deal with.

3 >> **JUDGE LAUTEN:** What lessons did you learn by climbing
4 Mount Kilimanjaro that applied to your work here in the
5 courthouse and your everyday life?

6 >> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** Great question, Fred. The answer to
7 that is the advice I give young people when they ask and I
8 gave my kids as they were growing up, and I live by it, and
9 that's to overprepare for whatever challenge is ahead of you.
10 I overprepared as an attorney. I overprepared in law school,
11 which is how I got through it, I guess. And for the mountain
12 climbing, I overprepared.

13 I think I was in the best shape of my life, and I could
14 not have done anything more than I did to get in shape. And
15 by overpreparing, I was able to achieve what I set out to
16 achieve.

17 And I think that's the way people should go through
18 life. They shouldn't just do the minimum. They should be
19 prepared -- or in my case, overprepared. And I think that's
20 a good -- good food for success in our society.

21 >> **JUDGE LAUTEN:** Great. That's great. Any additional
22 advice you would give to anyone thinking about that climb?
23 Obviously preparing and overpreparing.

24 >> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** Yeah.

25 >> **JUDGE LAUTEN:** Anything in addition to that?

1 **>> JUDGE BLECHMAN:** Climb something similar so you're
2 not in shock when you get there. We climbed in cold climates
3 before. It was 30 degrees below when we got to the summit.
4 But having climbed Rainier, we were pretty much -- Carlos
5 Payas and I were pretty much used to it, so it was not a
6 shock to our system.

7 But don't let this be the first mountain is the first
8 advice I would give. And as a predicate to that, I would say
9 anybody can do this if they really want to. There was
10 some -- I think a 72-year-old guy was in our group, and he
11 was doing it. He was a doctor. He didn't make it, but
12 that's because he got too ill from the altitude, not because
13 he didn't train for it.

14 **>> JUDGE LAUTEN:** So, Mark, I imagine you formed pretty
15 strong bonds with the people you climbed with, certainly the
16 group that you're with. What about your guides? Tell us a
17 little bit about the guides that you used and your
18 relationship with them.

19 **>> JUDGE BLECHMAN:** We had four guides. One of them was
20 our head guide named Abel. He was actually -- is actually a
21 civil engineer in Africa. And he loves guiding people.
22 Wonderful human being. About our age. Has a family and
23 leaves them to take tourists up to the top of the tallest
24 mountain on his continent. We still keep in touch eight
25 years later.

1 The people that I climbed with, we've developed a
2 friendship. We've climbed other mountains together, and we
3 call each other on our summit anniversaries, if you will, and
4 regale our success.

5 So it created a lasting relationship with all of those
6 people.

7 **>> JUDGE LAUTEN:** Well, Mark, what's your next
8 challenge? Do you have another challenge that lies ahead?

9 **>> JUDGE BLECHMAN:** Well, I've been doing triathlons,
10 Fred. And in doing so, I've learned that I love the cycling
11 most of all, and I've been doing some long-term cycling --
12 long-distance -- pardon me -- cycling, I'm going to actually
13 get a group of people and ride across the United States from
14 coast to coast.

15 **>> JUDGE LAUTEN:** Well, if you do that, then you
16 certainly have to come back and allow us to interview you
17 again and find out about that amazing experience also.

18 **>> JUDGE BLECHMAN:** Would love to do that. Thank you.

19 **>> JUDGE LAUTEN:** Thank you.

20 So thank you so much to my friend and colleague, Mark
21 Blechman. What a fascinating story, and I think it
22 demonstrates that judges might sometimes seem to be distant
23 from everyone who sees them are human beings with fascinating
24 life adventures and life stories.

25 Thank you again, Mark. We appreciate it.

1 >> Thank you for listening to "Open Ninth:
2 Conversations Beyond the Courtroom," brought to you by Chief
3 Judge Frederick J. Lauten and the Ninth Judicial Circuit
4 Court of Florida.

5 Please remember to follow us on Facebook and Twitter for
6 more information about the Ninth Judicial Circuit Court.

7 (Music.)

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