

OPEN NINTH:

CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM

SUSKAUER RAISES THE BAR:

A CANDID CONVERSATION WITH MICHELLE SUSKAUER

THE 70TH PRESIDENT OF THE FLORIDA BAR

EPISODE 51

JUNE 19, 2018

HOSTED BY: FREDERICK J. LAUTEN

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

Now, here’s your host, Chief Judge Frederick J. Lauten.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** We are thrilled today to be joined by Michelle Suskauer, who is the President-Elect of the Florida Bar for the next two days, and at which time she’ll become the 70th President of the Florida Bar and the 6th woman to serve as President of the Florida Bar. Michelle is a top-rated trial lawyer. Her Bar activities are almost too numerous to name, but she’s the past President of the Palm Beach County Bar Association, the past President of the Florida Association for Women Lawyers, Chapter – Palm Beach Chapter, currently President of the Board of Directors of the Legal Aid Society for Palm Beach County. I could go on and on for hours –

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Please don’t.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** All right. Most importantly, President-Elect and will take the oath of office as President – 70th President of the Florida Bar in the next two days. So Madam President, welcome, and welcome to Open Ninth.

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Thank you very much. I’m thrilled to be here.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** It’s great to have you. So I know you got your undergraduate degree at Boston University interestingly enough in communications, so you’re a natural at what we’re doing right now. And then attended American University’s Law School, as I understand it. So how did you end up in Florida?

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** That's a good question. I had been coming down to Florida since I was a baby. My grandparents, like a lot of grandparents, especially from the northeast, moved down. And so it was always going to grandma camp. And I never thought I would ever live in Florida, but at third year of law school, I wanted to be a criminal trial lawyer, whether a state attorney or a public defender. And this was a wonderful opportunity that I had, and I never, again, thought I would ever settle where I would vacation as a child all of my years growing up. So that's how I made it down.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Great, so which one was it? Did you start as a public defender or state attorney?

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** I was a public defender in Palm Beach County, and I'm actually the first former public defender to ever serve as President of the Florida Bar.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** That's fascinating. So you're going to bring a perspective to the Florida Bar that no one has ever brought before. So let's talk a little bit about that.

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Sure.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** How will your experience as a criminal practitioner shape your presidency as President of the Florida Bar?

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Well, you know, it's interesting, we've only had one criminal law practitioner, Hank Coxe, and he was a prosecutor many years before. But I think as a former government lawyer, and my husband who is my former law partner, is now on the bench, having that experience, working, being in the trenches day in and day out, really understanding the challenges that you face as a government lawyer, the constant turnover because people can't

afford to stay in the office to do that type of work, staffing issues and space issues, I understand that because I've lived it. And then being small firm practitioner as a criminal defense lawyer for probably about eighteen years and understanding, you know, how to market, chasing business, trying to keep the lights on, dealing with all types of issues, with personnel, I think the majority of lawyers in Florida – 75% of us are in law firms of ten or fewer. And that's a very important perspective because I'm there. I live that experience everyday. I understand those challenges.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** So help me with this. I think there have been some other presidents of the Florida Bar who came from small firms, but not many. Haven't most presidents represented larger firms?

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** You certainly have had – certainly, it's been a while since we've had somebody from a small firm, I think maybe 15 years or something from a law firm of one or two, and so we have had a number of presidents from large law firms. And certainly they bring different gifts and skillsets to the table as well because, of course, we do have lawyers in Florida that practice in large firms. But to be able to bring in the skillset and the understanding, the perspective, the lens of that small firm lawyer, and then on top, having the government lawyer experience, I think resonated with folks when I was running around the state campaigning for this office.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** So how long was your campaign? What was it like to campaign?

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** I feel like it was forever. Okay.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** How long was it actually?

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** It was actually about 14 months. It was a very long campaign. It just seems like people line up earlier and earlier. I ran against a big firm practitioner, and it was exhausting, expensive, exasperating, and exhilarating, and the best thing I've ever done.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Best story from your candidacy is?

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Oh, the best story. I mean, I have some highs and lows, okay.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** I'm sure when you're campaigning –

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** And everyone has. And I think one of the – one of the low lows was – it was toward the end of the campaign, so it was in February, and I was just running on fumes. And I had a crazy week where I think Monday I was in Daytona, Tuesday, I was in Ocala and Wednesday, I was supposed to be in Lakeland, and Thursday was Jacksonville, and Friday was Martin County. And I was getting sick for the first time in 14 months and I was giving a CLE in Ocala on Grievance. I was trying, when I was campaigning, not necessarily just to give stump speeches, I wanted to give people something, and since I had a lot of experience with Florida Bar grievance work being chair of the disciplinary review committee, I was offering a CLE to different bar associations. And so I was just going nonstop, and right after that, I just lost complete speed and ended up in the hospital dehydrated. And ended up after they rehydrated me, drove three and a half hours home and then continued on my week. But that wasn't even the low point. The low point was coming back from Jacksonville, and I really wanted to get home. It was like toward the end of that terrible week and I'm like, I just see a Denny's and a Hampton Inn, and I go, okay, this is it. That's the stop. And I didn't know where I was, and I remember texting my husband, saying I'm at some Denny's having pancakes and

soup, and I am at – I'm staying at a Hampton Inn. I said Florida Bar presidency campaign, priceless, and that was it.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Holy smoke.

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Yeah, so that was the low. But I met folks in every corner of the state and I think it's really going to make me a much more effective President and effective leader because I went on that listening tour and met with so many people around the state, learning about their issues, whether they were government lawyers, big firm lawyers, managing partners or solos.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** I know that's when we met first, was during the campaign. I saw you very often in Central Florida, so I know you were really active, and it worked.

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** It was, and it was so wonderful to be able to visit the 9th Circuit. I had so much support and just the events that you all have are so incredibly well attended. And it was really – I loved the different communities around the state and I just love coming to Orlando.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** So you probably appreciate more than most how diverse the state of Florida is. It is a diverse state, is it not?

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** It really is and I drove it. So I killed my car. I put like 50 thousand miles on my car. But I drove from Lake City to – Pensacola all the way down to Key West and everywhere in between, so a very diverse state, but I really learned it.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** I know Madam President one of your issues or goals as President of the Florida Bar is to talk about criminal justice reforms and I thought we could talk a little bit about that. Can you tell me what you have in mind and what issues you think are important?

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Sure. Well, given my background, and having lived basically within the criminal justice system my entire career, I also made it a point when I was travelling around and campaigning to visit with every state attorney and public defender's office that would let me in. And listen to the issues and talk to the elected public defenders and state attorneys and the assistants. But also understanding that Florida has one of the highest incarceration rates in the country, and certainly it's not helping us and that there are alternatives. And we have some very forward thinking legislators in Florida and I'll give a shout out to Senator Jeff Brandes who really has been trying to push common sense criminal justice reform. Unfortunately, the end of last year's legislative session with the tragedy of Parkland, it got derailed. So what I thought is, okay, we've never had a criminal justice summit before that we've put on. But what I need to do is, I need to meet with folks from both sides of the aisle, state attorneys, public defenders, judges, folks in think tanks, both conservative and liberal. And when I did I realized that we had so much more in common in terms of the issues than we did differences. We just came at it different ways. And so I thought, okay, what I want to do is bring stakeholders together, put a steering committee together and then have a summit before the next legislative session which is a little later so that we already had buy-in for this common sense criminal justice reform, issues on sentencing reform, bail reform, and civil citations. I mean, we could talk about two hundred different issues, but we really need to wiggle it down, especially with issues where we have the kind of commonality. So we've already begun this process. Hank Coxe who was past Florida

Bar President, the other criminal lawyer whose led the Bar, is going to chair this two day summit.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Where will that be?

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** It's going to be in Tampa.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** When will it be?

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** And it's going to be in October, two days before the Florida Bar fall meeting. And we're really excited about it.

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** That's great. I have said repeatedly because we've had these issues locally, that bail reform has become a Nationwide issue, that many states, lots of jurisdictions are looking at bail reform. In researching, I found that Kentucky has outlawed the surety bond business. You cannot write a surety bond in the state of Kentucky. If you commit a crime, they release people based on risk assessment instruments only, and there are other states, Texas now is under – certain counties under preliminary injunction about how they set bond for low level misdemeanors. New York is looking at it; lots of states are looking at bail reform and sentencing reform.

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Right. It seems as though Florida may be the outlier on some of these issues. And I've been reading lately with some of our state attorneys who are very forward thinking, who are saying, you know what, we are going to look at this differently because what we have right now is not working.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right, fascinating studies about if you score low risk, low need on a risk assessment instrument, the longer you stay in jail, the greater your chances of being a recidivist are; the faster you get out of there, the lower – anyway, but we can talk about –

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** And we – and we know that because certainly when people come out of prison, they're not coming out as necessarily model citizens, so we know that. We understand that.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** So another issue I know that is one of your issues is about gender in the Florida Bar. And you, of course, will be the incoming President, close in time to the hashtag Me Too Movement, and Nationwide conversations about gender and gender equality and harassment, so can you share with us some of your thoughts about how you would frame that issue for the Florida Bar?

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Sure. I think that the Florida Bar has been a leader on two different issues that's really a part of the national conversation. One of them, as you discussed, is gender bias and gender harassment. And the other is mental health and wellness. First, let's take the first issue which is gender bias and harassment. Before the Me Too Movement, back in 2015, and the Florida Bar has studied and discussed these issues for years and years. Unfortunately, we have to continue to do that and I'm hoping that – I'm the mother of two daughters, that in five years, in ten years, we'll look back saying, I can't believe we were still discussing gender bias and sexual harassment. But back in 2015, the young lawyers division sent out a survey to their young lawyers, female members, about how many had experienced gender bias. And whatever that means, gender bias. There was about 42, 43% of lawyers five years or less in practice that said that they had experienced it. I looked at those numbers and I thought, wow, that's low. Every woman, or not every woman, but most women that I speak to

have had something, whether it's just something said to them, the way that they have been treated, not getting some sort of a promotion. There's a variety of different things that can go into that mix, and so that turned into a gender bias commission, and now a special committee on gender equality. This year I'm excited that we're going to actually be rolling out and implementing some very important programs. A blue ribbon designation for firms that promote, hire and retain female attorneys. And one thing that – and gender bias tool kits for organizations, for government agencies, for law firms. But one thing I think is very important that gives it teeth is about the rules regulating the Florida Bar. We already have rules against this type of improper and unethical behavior. I don't think we've communicated it well, and I don't think we have a good pipeline in terms of reporting it. That's going to change under my leadership. Because given this National movement, the Me Too Movement, the change has to happen now. This is the time, and so if it's not going to happen now, I don't know when it's going to happen. And certainly under my leadership, we're going to make sure that this gets pushed ahead. I don't want to keep having this conversation about gender bias, discrimination, sexual harassment.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** So gender bias and discrimination, criminal justice reform, those are two big ideas. Congratulations, and I applaud you for them. What else, if anything, would you list as one of your major goals?

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Well, one of my – I did also mention mental health and wellness. Michael Higer, our soon to be immediate past president, one of his main focuses was on mental health and wellness. And we had a special committee that studied it. We now have made that a permanent Florida Bar committee. So this is going to be a permanent focus of the Florida Bar because this is an issue, and especially – I learned this when I was running around the state, that resonates with pretty much every lawyer. We are – and unfortunately, so much of it is

technologically driven. We are connected to our devices 24/7, and especially as a criminal defense lawyer, I sleep next to it, and don't detach. Whether we're a judge, whether we're a managing partner, whoever we are, we are looking at our emails, our texts. We're getting pleadings, we're getting communications, we're not detaching and it's causing dissatisfaction and stress, plus there is a stigma that if someone is suffering from mental health issues, that you're weak. That maybe you won't get the business because we're also competitive Type-A folks. And so we need to destigmatize and continue to do that. The thing that I love is that voluntary bars throughout the state have really been picking up on this, and will continue to do that. We're going to help give resources to voluntary bars so that they can continue to do that good work and reach people in their own communities. The Orange County Bar has done some amazing things with health and wellness.

And the other main focus for me is solos and small firms, given the fact that this is who I am and because so many feel detached from our Bar, I want to make sure we do a better job at giving them the resources they need to do what they love which is practice law. And so one thing that we already have is the practice resource institute. And we're rebranding it as the legal fuel. And legal fuel is going to help solos and small firms, and really everyone. Give them common sense information and tools that they need to practice. And one thing that I'm promoting is the legal fuel's speakers series which is going to be 3 CLE's, one a month, and basically you can get it any time you want. They're sort of fun, sort of like the Florida Bar on Demand. And it's going to be on common sense, things that people need, like ten ways to avoid a grievance and how to market your practice using social media. We're going to be using statewide very well-respected attorneys from around Florida who are going to be our speakers. And I'm going to be, not a big surprise, since I'm a big communicator, having a monthly video

message to our membership. And I'm going to be pushing out one of these speakers series, 3 CLE's every month.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** That's fabulous; that's great.

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** So those are some of the little issues that I'm going to be working on this year.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** I have to bring up one other issue, and I've heard you mention it before, but it is near and dear to my heart, so bear with me. What are your thoughts about the legislators' funding of the court system?

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Well, and certainly as the wife of a judge, I'm very conscience of making sure that our courts are properly funded, because there is nothing that's more important than the public having confidence in our judiciary, and the judiciary being able to do what it needs to do which is operate, fully-funded as an independent branch. And so it's a tough situation and it's a battle every year. And I know that after 11 years of no increase, I think, this past year or a year ago, the legislature finally gave a little bump up.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** There was a salary increase. I'm going to come back to the workload issues in a minute.

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Right, and so that was significant but I think it's very, very important that we continue to stress how important the independence of our judiciary is. We have a very good relationship with the circuit judge's conference, with the county judge's conference, and I'm hoping that, you know, and I've been meeting with different legislators. I will continue to do that so that they understand our goal which is to protect the branch, and how important it is to make sure that the branch is fully-funded. And I think it's very important that

there are legislators who – there’s a push and pull, and sometimes there are things that are done that seem to be vindictive based on different rulings that come out. What is the -- maybe you would know better – the percentage of the budget? Is it one-half of one percent still?

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** .06 percent.

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Oh, so we bumped up.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Well, by one-tenth of a percent.

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Right.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** So we don’t get one percent of the budget even.

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** So again, looking at that, we just – we can’t function well. And my husband, for example, he’s in the family division and down in Palm Beach County he doesn’t get a clerk. He stamps his own documents. He doesn’t get an interpreter unless someone brings their own, unless they are doing DV hearings, domestic violence hearings, he has no clerk and no interpreter. How do you function that way as a judge.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Very frustrating. So our local issue, Madam President, I want you to be aware of this. We started the first business courts in the state of Florida, started in the 9th Circuit, then Tampa adopted them. Miami and Broward County adopted a complex litigation division. I shut the business court down this year. We qualified for two circuit judges this year and we didn’t get them. Last year we qualified for three of a total of four for the entire state and we didn’t get them. As you know, we haven’t had a new judge in Florida since 2006. Our family law judges carry a higher caseload than any comparably sized circuit in the state. In weighing families in crisis, which your husband deals with as a family law judge, children who

are being traumatized, adverse childhood experiences flowing from divorce, I had to really get more help in the family division so I last year closed down one of the business court divisions, put that judge in family. Starting next week, actually two weeks from now, July 2nd, I'm closing down the other one and putting that judge in the family law division because families need immediate help. They just can't wait. But I'd like to serve our business community because they pay taxes and they bring employment, and they're important, but we haven't had a new judge since 2006. So we just can't be all things to all people if the legislature won't help us a little bit with funding. So I appreciate that that's one of your agenda items. Good luck with it, and anything we can do to help you, please let me know, call Tallahassee, whatever we can do to help, but I applaud that.

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** I appreciate that, Judge. We also for the first time this year, because I want to continue the great relationship we have with the judicial conferences, I've appointed someone from the circuit conference as well as someone from the county conference to be a special liaison to the Board of Governors during my year.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Great, let me know who that is and I'll give them my pitch about business court.

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Absolutely.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Let me ask you some quick five questions.

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Okay.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** One, what do you love about being a lawyer?

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** I love helping families.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** What do you dislike about being a lawyer?

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** What do I dislike about being a lawyer? The constant battle for business.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** If you could wave a magic wand, in two days when you're the incoming President of the Florida Bar, and immediately change, either the Florida Bar itself or practicing law in Florida, what would change first with a magic wand?

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Wow, you weren't going to give me a heads up on any of these questions, huh? These are tough. What would I change with a magic wand?

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Well, first it might be gender equality.

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** I mean, I just – you know, I think that probably is one of the things that I would change which is, but it's – to be able to have true equality in law firms with women who are equity partners and managing partners at the same rate that men are.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Do we have too many law schools in Florida?

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Oh, I – I don't want to touch that.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** All right. Well, let me just share this with our listeners. I don't know what the answer is, and I appreciate that. That's a tough one. When I started practicing law, there were five law schools in Florida. There are twelve law schools now.

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Twelve or thirteen.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Maybe thirteen law schools.

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Yes.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Maybe I'm missing it by one. So we have more than doubled the number of law schools in the state of Florida which are largely a product of the American Bar Association. And so the easy kind of knee jerk reaction is, well, we have too many lawyers, too many law schools. However, we have a significant access to the courts issue and I thought maybe you could talk about that. I know that you have said publicly before that maybe 55 percent or more of the public can't access the court system for one reason or another.

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** I think even more – I think the numbers are much higher than that. And so what do you do? How do we match up folks so that we can make sure that they do have access to the courts? Because we have priced ourselves out of the market. We have so many people who cannot afford counsel. And if they're not being serviced by legal aid and they don't qualify, then they're in the low bono situation where they're sort of in this nether world of where they can't get the assistance that they need. And there are ways that we can harness technology where we can connect, because sometimes it's just a question that they need answered. Maybe a couple of questions. So how do we harness technology with the folks that need answers? How do we maybe utilize lawyers that are transitioning out – transitioning out of the practice, retired lawyers, to assist? How do we use young lawyers? And lawyers especially who have no jobs, crushing debt, to bring them into legal aid societies, to bring them into – to get training so that they can actually assist and provide pro bono or low bono situations. I think there are things we have done that we're working on. I think there are things that we have to do that we haven't started doing, and we have to be as creative as we can. Now, certainly there's a space there where – (door opened)

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Certainly there's a – I think we were interrupted there.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Somebody walked in our room. So I think, I anticipate that it will be a significant challenge for you, and has been for a while. We have this access to court issue, so we need citizens who need to get lawyers and help navigating the court system. On the other hand, lawyers have to earn a living. They can't give away their services for free. They have debt from school and they have families to raise, and mortgages to pay so it's this delicate balance of I need to charge for my services to survive. A large part of our population doesn't have access to the courts. So maybe it's a little unfair to throw at you unprepared, do we have too many law schools? It is an irony that we have more law schools than we've ever had, but we also have a significant access to the courts issue, and I know that's going to be a challenge for you. Your membership, of course, says don't take money out of my pocket, Madam President, in the access to courts issue and I appreciate that. On the other hand, I, as a judge, and you as President of the Florida Bar Association, we have to be concerned about why are so many people unable to access our court system, so it's a delicate balance.

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** And we continue to push for lawyers – listen, we have lawyers that if you look at the numbers, you know, millions of hours that they are providing free pro bono work and we celebrate them every January in the Florida Supreme Court, but we always need more because the population in Florida is growing. We have a growing population of attorneys too. It's also the culture of teaching and understanding that this is part of our obligation as attorneys to give back. And so yes, we all are in it to make money, to make a living. We've chosen this profession, and we have to run our businesses, and we have billable hours. But this is something that we have an obligation to do as attorneys. We don't just live in a community in a vacuum. We live in communities where there's a need, and we have to be able to participate in our communities to assist those in need.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** I know this is a little bit of patting ourselves on the back, but I'm curious, when you travelled around the state in pursuit of your position as President of the Florida Bar, did you gain a sensation that I've gained being Chief Judge that lawyers by and large are some of the most engaged members of the community, for a large part – despite our image in movies and tv -- some of the more compassionate people who care about other people, and people who work very hard on behalf of their clients. Is that your impression?

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Oh, absolutely.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** And yet somehow in the media, or somehow we have gained this image of we're greedy, we're money grubbers, all we're out for is ourselves, we don't care about any effective litigation on our clients as long as we get paid, which is the opposite of what I actually know from my real-life experience, but somehow that image has taken over.

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Right, and I think also when you hear about lawyers who take advantage of their clients, and there certainly are bad people in every profession. But you don't – I don't think our profession is fairly painted with that broad brush, and we can always do a better job at promoting the good works that lawyers do. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem to be sexy to the media where they're like, oh, wow, let's see, are we going to have a story about a terrible lawyer or a story about a wonderful lawyer that does great things. And you hope that you're going to have responsible media who's going to be picking up on the good things as well as some of the negative things, and that's why I have been involved in Bar work my entire career because of the people I've met and because of the ability to do the work that we can do and the changes that we make to our community, and how many people that we help as a result.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Yeah, unfortunately, I mean, this saying, one bad apple spoils the whole batch, is just probably true for our profession as any other group, certainly true for our profession.

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Certainly, and people are in crisis most of the time when they need us. And they're emotional, especially in the family area or in criminal and if they don't get the result that they want because, hey, listen, when you're going to court, someone's not – someone's going to leave unhappy. And whose fault is that going to be? Well, it's either going to be the judge's fault, or the lawyer's fault or maybe both.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** So I've heard you described as a highly compassionate attorney who has bonded very closely with the clients that you've represented over your career, not just your clients, but the clients' families. So I don't – because sometimes I don't think that is portrayed to the public, can you put into your own words what it means to bond with a client and bond with the client's family?

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Well, I think especially what I do in criminal, when someone gets arrested or someone is in trouble, it just doesn't affect them. It affects everyone that loves them. And I think being a criminal defense lawyer you have to have that piece of you that, of course, is very compassionate. The person is not just a number or just another client. This is most likely the worst thing that's ever happened to them. It takes a lot of handholding and patience. And sometimes, it's not every family, but sometimes we really seem to become a member of the family because we're really helping them. And helping them through the worst time in their lives. And so that really is the most amazing part. When you asked me what I love about being a lawyer, I said, helping families. I love doing that. One of my cases that is very near and dear to my heart, I had a client who was 16 who was very bright and he was accused of capital sexual

battery, inappropriately touching a family friend's daughter. And his whole life was on the line. And we ended up learning through litigating, we didn't end up to trial, that this was completely fabricated by the little girl's parents. And we got information from therapists and other places that this was the case. It was completely fabricated. His whole life was just hanging there on the precipice, and he's now at one of the top colleges in the Country and he's going to be a doctor. And for me, I went – we were invited, my husband and I, to his graduation party. And everyone knew who we were, and we were a member – we were a member of the family and it was all night just celebrating and hugging us and so much love. And that just makes it all worth it. But those are the cases you lose sleep over at night.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Well, I've heard it said that there's no greater pressure than being a criminal defense lawyer and representing someone that you truly believe is innocent. Oftentimes people have done something. It's a matter of, did they do this thing. But I can't imagine any greater pressure than a mandatory life sentence and representing someone who you truly believe is not guilty and results in sleepless nights and tremendous pressure.

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Sure, absolutely.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** So let me ask you this, Madam President, how many members in the Florida Bar?

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** About 106,000.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** 106,000 member organization, very complex.

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Third largest mandatory Bar in the Country.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** You're going to work day in and day out. Can you really maintain a practice or does it sort have to go on hold a little bit for the next year?

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** I mean, I'll continue. I have a trial set in two months. I practiced the entire time that I ran around the state so if I can do that for 14 months, I can absolutely continue practicing. Will it be difficult? It's always challenging, and it just depends on how you use your time.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** You must be a great time manager.

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Sleep is overrated, I guess. But I love what I do and I don't want to stop. I have an associate, so that's a wonderful thing, which I didn't have before, and so hopefully that will help me continue to help the people that I need to help.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** I want to disclose to our listeners that we are sitting in a meeting room in a hotel in Central Florida because this is the Florida Bar Convention week. We are in the beginning of the Florida Bar. President Suskauer is in high, high demand. I can't imagine the number of meetings and appearances you have to make this week and yet somehow you found time to spend over a half an hour with us and permit us to interview you. And I think that that is representative of your commitment to the Florida Bar, of your compassion, of your desire to get messages out to the public about what it truly means to be a lawyer. And I think the Florida Bar, the judicial branch, the Florida Supreme Court is well served and lucky to have Michelle Suskauer as the incoming President of the Florida Bar. We wish you all the success in the world. We're proud of you and we're proud that you are our representative as the President of this Bar. Thank you so much for talking to us.

>>**MS. SUSKAUER:** Thank you so much, Chief. I really appreciate it. Thank you.

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