

OPEN NINTH:
CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM
COMBATTING ELDER ABUSE IN AMERICA
EPISODE 54
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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:** Welcome to Open Ninth. We’re here today with Bob Blancato who is the President of Matz Blancato & Associates. He is the National Coordinator of a bipartisan 3000-member Elder Justice Coalition and the Executive Director of the National Association of Nutrition and Aging Services Programs. Bob has more than 20 years of service in the congressional and executive branches, including the senior staff of the US House Select Committee on Aging. He has been appointed by President Clinton to be the Executive Director of the 1995 White House Conference on Aging. And most recently Bob is the immediate past chair of the board – the American Society on Aging, and on the National Board of the AARP. Bob also serves on the advisory panel on outreach and education of the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services, and was recently selected by Next Avenue as a 2016 influencer on Aging. Bob is a contributing blogger to Next Avenue and he writes frequently on aging issues. He holds a BA from Georgetown University and Master’s in Public Administration from American University, and Bob has won numerous awards for advocacy including being knighted by the Italian Republic in 2011. So that’s quite an impressive resume, Bob. Welcome to Open Ninth.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** Thank you, Judge Lauten. It’s a pleasure to be here.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** So Bob, maybe you can tell me a little bit about your pathway to becoming an expert in this field. How did you become involved with elder issues and services?

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** I had the good fortune when I worked on Capital Hill, I worked for a member of Congress named Mario Biaggi from New York, became an original member of the House Select Committee on Aging which in its second year of creation, was chaired by the great Floridian Claude Pepper.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** I, as a young staffer in my twenties, had the ability to learn from the master, so to speak, meaning Claude Pepper, who taught us a whole lot about the need for a committee to look into a range of issues affecting older adults so that we could be in a position to offer solutions, or do investigations or whatever. So it became an assignment that, you know, then became a cause as time went on. And it was a great experience to work in that environment, and I was just fortunate enough to carry that on later in my working life.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Well, that's fabulous. So in your younger years, well, first of all, what a great experience to work on the Hill. I lived up there for a while and all the action seemed to me to be on the Hill. And then you got to work on an interesting committee and with a great representative, and someone who both lived and advocated on behalf of elder issues. Tell me, what is the Elder Justice Coalition?

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** The Elder Justice Coalition is, as you referred to initially, is a bipartisan group that serves as a national voice to promote elder justice by working on passage and development of legislation, and regulations in Washington to promote elder justice by helping to prevent elder abuse. So it is really an advocacy group. It was created at the request of the United States Senator, actually, who was Senator – former Senator John Breaux of Louisiana who became the original author of the Elder Justice Act, which was introduced in 2003. And he

and Senator Hatch, who was another co-sponsor of the Bill said, we need a dedicated coalition to help move this Bill forward because we're kind of going into a new area with this Bill, and we need to have some kind of dedicated support using both national groups, state groups, local groups to help build a case for this important legislation. So we were that voice and we've tried to continue in that vein through the fifteen years of our existence.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** That's fascinating. So both that group and your own experience, maybe you can help our listeners by defining what elder abuse includes.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** Okay, elder abuse really – let me start with one basic premise. Elder abuse occurs really when, let's say there's a trusted relationship between two entities and two people. When one person violates that trust, particularly against an older adult, that forms the basis of elder abuse. But elder abuse itself can be physical, it can be psychological, it can be sexual abuse, it can be financial abuse. It can also involve neglect on the part of someone who is supposed to be caring for someone. And then the saddest form of elder abuse, which is actually now the second fastest growing form of it, is self-neglect. When a person is pretty much left abandoned, left alone, without the capacity to care of themselves, or, you know, just be able to function in a normal environment. That can become self-neglect. So all of those, you know, constitute what elder abuse represents and is defined as.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** I know that there is a discussion in my state right now about the abuses in the guardianship system, but I have – and I chair a committee, a statewide committee that addresses that. But one of the things that I've said more than once is, that not having a guardianship program could equally lead to abuse and then you've identified the second fastest growing area of elderly abuse is just leaving someone alone. And so I know statewide we have to look at abuses in the guardianship system, but without any system I would think that

would be the fastest growing problem in elder abuse is that people just don't get help when they, in fact, need some sort of help.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** I think that's an excellent point that you make. And I think that the efforts that are being made in Washington, they include, you know, Bills that have already been adopted into law such as the Court Appointed Guardian Accountability and Senior Protection Act, which was a Bill sponsored by Senators Klobuchar, a democrat from Minnesota, and John Cornyn, a republican of Texas. You know, what I think the issue here is, you know, in a lot of cases, you know, there's always some bad apples in every sort of, you know, line of work on occasion. We dealt with nursing home issues and stuff, and the notion of going overboard by, you know, condemning the whole system, doesn't serve anybody's purpose.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** At the same time, you know, there are 1.3, according the National Center for State Courts, there's 1.3 million adult guardianship cases in the United States with an estimated 50 billion dollars of assets under guardianship. So there's significant assets and issues involved, but I think what people try to get their arms around is how do you ensure that when you have a guardian assigned to you, that they are looking out for your best interest and they're not contributing to financial exploitation or things of that nature.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right. And in your studies, what have you learned? I guess, maybe what I'm asking is, that's a pretty significant number, 50 billion in assets, 1.3 million adults. What are some of the best practices that you have seen adopted in Federal or State court systems?

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** Well, that's a good point, and we're not as, you know, knowledgeable about the individual state activity. We know that 12 states require certification of professional guardians, which I think is an important step in that direction. I think that – there's a Wing's Program that is run by the Administration for Community Living that focuses on improving the quality of guardianship. The National Guardianship Association has released standards for guardians that's available through their website. And I think where we're going with this whole thing is, you know, the federal government has been sort of slow to get into this space, because it's such a state run situation.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** I think where we're going sooner rather than later, I suspect, is some kind of uniform standards that could be adopted as part of a piece of legislation that could then be, you know, sent to the states for compliance for them to have the proper guardianship rules and so on. And I know that your Senator Nelson is looking at a proposal to deal with guardianship. We've been talking to his office and I think that people want to go tread carefully on this because again, any time you move the federal government into something that they haven't been there before, you got to go at it in an incremental fashion. Even when the Elder Justice Act, the landmark law that we helped get passed, you know, there were people who said, you know, this is a state and local problem. Why is the federal government getting involved? And the answer is, you know, like adult protective services, for example, which is very important in the whole fight against elder abuse, they have no dedicated funding. They run under the auspices of a block grant, and as you know, in block grants, you know, it's all what the governor of a given state decides that he wants to do with spending the money. And when it was discovered that 13 states spent no money on adult protective services, that prompted this Bill to

be introduced to say we need to give them a dedicated source of money. That is an appropriate federal role. Just like an appropriate federal role would be to give resources to support best practices that occur in localities that work to fight elder abuse, to multidisciplinary teams, so it's all about where is the proper intervention, if you will, on the part of the government. And you know, there's more buzz going on in the guardianship space than ever before up here, but people are still walking, you know, a little gingerly on it.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right. So if you are asked to describe the main features of the Elder Justice Act, is it getting money to the states? What – I mean, without going through the Bill line by line, how would you define what its major purpose is?

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** I think the major purpose is to create for the first time, a coordinated and comprehensive federal strategy for dealing with elder abuse, neglect and exploitation. And I think there are three things that stand out in the Bill, one of which is operating actually very well right now. And I'll focus on that first. The Bill created what's called the Elder Justice Coordinating Council, and I remember when I was down at Barry University giving my remarks, I said to people, you know, that sounds like such a Washington term. But what it really means is that there are at least a dozen federal agencies, from the Department of Labor to the Social Security Administration, to the postal service inspection system, to the Department of Justice that have some existing programs and resources going into elder abuse, but no one really knew what the other one was doing.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** And so in this environment that we're in, as you know, these are called fiscal times, you know, you first have to demonstrate that you're going to use your

resources that you have effectively, you know, before you go out and get additional resources. This coordinating council was created as a result of the Elder Justice Act. It's been in operation now for about ten years. I just testified at their last meeting, which was held on June 5th, and you know what you're hearing is what these different agencies are doing in their space, you know, staying in their lane so to speak, but also contributing to a reduction of elder abuse. And probably the best example seems to be coming recently out of the Department of Justice which has really committed some significant resources going out and doing nationwide sweeps to capture these people who do these scams that, you know, defraud older people. The most recent one, they did a sweep and picked up over 200, you know, fraud types who had defrauded older adults out of half a billion dollars and picked them all up, and they're being prosecuted. So that's a good example of, you know, using resources wisely. The other two provisions I think that stand out, the one I mentioned about seeking to getting a dedicated funding stream for adult protective services, and the third is to provide enhanced training for the long-term care ombudsman that operate primarily in nursing homes to investigate instances of elder abuse. But very recent, the government accountability office said that we're starting to see increased trends of elder abuse issues in assisted living. This is where they can be helpful in that regard. So those are three things I think that represent the major elements of elder abuse.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Well, that's interesting. So there are these institutional settings where elders are cared for on a spectrum of need and then there are guardianships for just individuals who don't live in an institutional setting, but are with family members or if they have no family members, professional guardian – professional guardians in various state courts. And I'm curious if the abuse happens more in one place than another, if you know.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** Well, generally speaking, elder abuse, the most common forms of elder abuse occur within the family. You know, most of the reports that come into Adult Protective Services and elsewhere, you know, involve family members, which makes the issue a little bit more complicated because it's very hard to legislate family relations.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right. Sure.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** Sometimes it is – it is about the caliber of training, and awareness and information that you convey to family members to avoid the circumstances that could lead to abuse. And in particular, you think about caregiving and you think about the stresses involved in being a caregiver. You know, yet there's a federal program under the Old Americans Act that will train individuals to be better family caregivers so that they can, you know, perform that difficult task without the stresses and the strains that, you know, might lead to abuse. But the stuff in the institutions, you know, it exists, but mostly it's about a staffing situation, making sure that you've got the right kind of people working in long term care facilities that have at least some adult abuse sensitivity training and understand different things. But there is a mechanism in the states and funded by the federal government to investigate complaints of abuse in nursing homes through the ombudsman program.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** I know in my state one of the big conversations is sort of a prioritization of restoring someone to self-sufficiency as quickly as you can, and so that self-determination is one of the goals. And yet, there is – there are – there's a category of individuals who for, you know, mostly for physical and mental issues desperately need someone to assist them in making decisions, if not make the decisions for them. And there's this sort of constant struggle between someone who really needs help and restoring somebody to self-determination. What are your thoughts about that?

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** That's a very – that is a very dicey subject. And in fact, we had a case up here in the District of Columbia involving an 87 year old woman who managed using what's called a supported decision-making law that was passed up here in May.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** She was able, with her attorneys, to convince the court to terminate a guardianship that was placed on her because on the view that she was fully capable of, you know, taking care of her situation or using other people other than a guardian to do that. And there's now several locales have – the 4th – DC is the 4th jurisdiction in the country that passed this law. Texas, Delaware and Wisconsin have as well. So I think, you know, you've got situations where you're always going to need somebody – some people are always going to need a guardian because as you point out about their incapacities or physical limitations, or whatever. But you've got to take it on a case by case basis and, you know, we're seeing – we're seeing the famous astronaut, Buzz Aldrin, going through the same issue. There's a story in the paper today up here, you know, and again, you know, tension on the part of the individual, I can handle my own affairs, you know. It's a very – it's a very sensitive subject. But you have to have at least some ability of understanding, you know, when to maintain the autonomy for the person.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** It's sad for me to even ask this question I'm about to ask, Bob, but is there – is there a greater level of physical elder abuse or financial elder abuse?

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** Oh, way more financial. There are estimates that if you take just the people who have been victims of financial abuse based on a study from about 2009, I guess it was, they lose up to 2.9 billion dollars a year just by being victims of financial abuse.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** In our experience, in the Court, I mean, some cases are pretty easy. You look at – I know one example, I'm not going to relate it to a case, but a guardian sold a Rolex watch for \$250.00 and probably pocketed the money. And the thing was worth probably \$2,000.00 or more but it was just a quick way to get money and keep some of the money. That's just a small example. I mean, the big examples are actually theft and stealing from the accounts of elder people who are less able to monitor their accounts. But then on the other hand, you have cases where there are family members in dispute who ought to be the guardian, and the courts are occupied in numerous hearings where one child is upset that another child was named the guardian. And so they second guess every expenditure and they question every expenditure, and it involves a lot of court time in these disputes that almost at times seem petty. And I'm not sure it's true for elder financial abuse but just interfamily dynamics that are broken down.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** Yeah, and you know I'm not a lawyer, but I know that in some cases, you know, reliance on mediation sometimes can be a good alternative to dragging it into a court and, you know, taking up your valuable time in that situation. But I think what we try to focus on and what we see most of are the cases where – and just about two weeks ago, I was at a program with a gentleman named Phillip Marshall, whose name you may have heard, if you focus on elder abuse. He was the grandson of Brooke Astor.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** No kidding.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** Very, very famous, long time, you know, American family, very wealthy, and one day Phillip goes to court and files a petition charging his father and his father's lawyer with financial abuse of his grandmother. And this case became a cause celebre for, you know, several months. And what it served to do in many ways was to put the issue out in the

public to see because every day this trial was going on, it was on the front page of the papers in New York. And, you know – and the other key piece that we haven't talked about yet, but I think is relevant here, another place where the federal government can and will be doing more, is providing resources to localities to have dedicated people in district attorney's offices and elsewhere who can focus on elder abuse cases. They have great programs in San Diego. There's a great prosecutor out there named Paul Greenwood who has – that's his whole portfolio for the most part, and he's remarkable.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** Because he lives it every day, and he can tell the story. Now, under the law that was just passed, a bipartisan bill by Senator Grassley and Senator Blumenthal, there are now going to be elder justice coordinators located in all 94 Federal Judicial Districts in the Country and I assume some will be in Florida as well.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Great, because we'll need them.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** Yeah, and it's about – the key word there is coordinating. You got to take what is available to you and find a coordinated strategy to help combat the problem. You're not going to hear all of it, and some of it is going to stay hidden, but there are certain things you can do to help prevent elder abuse in your community.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Yeah. And locally, I think you know, Judge Rodriguez who just completed a term in probate and guardianship here is very interested in establishing in the law schools locally, and the university locally courses about elder abuse in hopes of creating volunteer court monitors who can assist the court, because we are limited in our resources in looking through records and saying, well, here's a likely area of financial abuse of the ward.who

is in the court. The Clerk of the Court is assigned those duties by statute in Florida but they're under financial pressures and need resources in order to do that and everything else they're asked to do as is the court. We're under financial pressure, so that's a pretty creative idea. Maybe we can train future lawyers or future accountants to volunteer as court monitors and assist in this area of financial review. And I'm sure there are hundreds of creative ideas like that occurring around the country.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** Yeah, and I think – and I had the pleasure of meeting Judge Rodriguez. He is a very dynamic guy. But I'm also on the advisory board at Stetson Law School.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** Which is really doing a lot of work in the whole elder justice and courses and things of that nature. I know that topic has come up down there as well about volunteer – people working in the space, and there's other proposals that have been out there for things like a single third party statewide financial auditing and investigation board. And Minnesota has a working system like that today. Nevada passed a law in 2015, you know, to again, find ways to work with law enforcement on referrals and things of that nature. So I think, you know, and the volunteer – look, in the broader world of aging programs and services, they wouldn't function without volunteers. They are the lifeblood of, you know, human services in this country. We do a lot of work up here in the nutrition space, meals on wheels and senior centers and stuff, and, you know, the more we utilize volunteers, train them properly, they can be an enormous asset to any community.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Well, that's great. That's great that that's happening. Maybe we should have started with this a little earlier, but maybe you can define for our listeners the metrics of the area that we are in. So this baby boomer generation is entering into its elder years and I know some people have used the term, there's a silver tsunami coming. Can you define those parameters for our listeners? Where we are and where we're going to be in the next ten years?

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** Yes, profile. First of all, the boomers, of which I'm one –

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Me too.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** Now, the oldest boomer is now 72, and the youngest boomer is now 54. So you know, when they start hitting 65, they will contribute to a doubling of the, you know, the 65 plus population in the country, you know, by the year 2030. So the demographics – the prediction of an aging America has reached photo fruition, and there's a great publication that comes out each year by the Administration on Aging and the census bureau that, you know, gives you projections about how fast the population is growing. But suffice it to say that the fastest growing sector are the 85 plus population in the country. They are growing rapidly, and you know you have in federal programs a range of definition of what constitutes an older person, which probably someday needs to get uniformed.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** Because Medicare is 65. Full retirement under social security is now 66 and then will be 67 in a few years. But you can qualify for Meals on Wheels at 60. You can get a job in the Older American's Act Community Service Employment Program at 55. You

can get early retirement at 62. So we have to come to some understanding about, you know, who we're dealing with and so on.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right. Right. And what is the effect of really an increase or better health system, better medical care, you know, even though there are issues about health care and the delivery of health care. I think it's undisputed that we provide better health care, particularly in the United States today than we did 50 years ago. So people are living longer because of advances in science. And so we have this baby boomer population that exploded after World War II. Combined with that is, because of health advancements, they're going to live a lot longer. And good, that's a great thing but it really does place stresses on social programs, doesn't it?

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** It does, and I think there's two things that come to mind on that point. One is a very positive development, which is for the first time in the history of the Medicaid Program now spending more money on home and community based services than it is on institutional care.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** That's good.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** Because of statistics, that's important to know. It's at less than five percent of older adults that live in nursing homes, yet our federal expenditures were being disproportionately sent that way. Older people, their families, their caregivers, whatever, prefer home and community-based services over obviously institutional care.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** The other area that's a little bit more daunting of a challenge is the whole issue of dementia and Alzheimer's.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** And I'm very proud, as a national board member of AARP, that we announced this week, in conjunction with our 60th anniversary, a 60 million dollar commitment toward a Dementia Discovery Fund so that we can, you know, look for the new ideas, the breakthrough ideas that might lead us to either a slowing of the onset of Alzheimer's or maybe even a cure, but in a way that allows for it to go more quickly through the process. Sometimes if you wait for government support and government money, you know, it could take a little longer. This is designed to be sort of a jumpstart for where the good ideas are in the area of dementia prevention and cures. These are all positive developments. But I would also say, I'm not a big fan of the term, silver tsunami. It conveys somewhat more of a negative thing. You know, we benefit from the value, from the experience of older adults in many places.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** I agree. I agree. I'm not sure our culture – I think that's sort of an Eastern culture philosophy which is with age, comes wisdom and value in a society. For some reason I think this Western culture sort of emphasizes youth and vigor and we need to adopt that sort of Eastern approach a little bit more. So I'm with you on that one.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** I'll tell you something, Judge, one of the first things that Claude Pepper did when he became chairman of the aging committee, was at that point – this was in the late 70's. We had mandatory retirement at 65 in a lot of industries in this country.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** And he said, why do we have that? You know, here I am 75 myself. I am, you know, been re-elected by my constituents, I have a job, et cetera. So he embarked on a campaign to focus on ability and not age. And within a couple of years that law

was lifted from 65 to 70 and basically it ended except for like high risk occupations. But that was a really important step to recognize the importance of older adults.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Well, I know in the branch that I work, there is a mandatory retirement age for Justices on the Florida Supreme Court of 70, so once they hit 70, they're out. Well, you can stretch it a little bit depending on where your birthday falls but we're debating – there's a proposed constitutional amendment to move that to 75. That judges can serve, not just the Supreme Court, but judges in Florida until they're 75. Although I think that's drafted so it's a hard 75. On your 75th birthday, you have to retire. And that raises an interesting issue, should there be any, you know, should there be any age at which are you mandated to stop the work you do? But at least it's being pushed back a little bit.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** There's a wonderful federal district court judge based in New York, Jack Weinstein, you may know the Weinstein's Rules of Evidence –

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** He's 96. He's still –

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** He's still plugging along. You know, I remember in the Obama care debate, I heard this statistic – I don't know if it was valid or invalid, and it's somewhat related to this, although you can certainly point out to me if it's not directly related, but this alarmed me somewhat in terms of social expenditures on health care, that something like 75 percent of your lifetime medical expenditures occur in the last six months of your life or year of your life. And I thought well, that's a fascinating issue in terms of appropriation of federal and state health care dollars, but it is tied in somewhat to this aging issue. Do you have any thoughts in that area?

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** I mean, I've heard the same statistic. I think it has to do a lot with what you can do on the preventative side to some degree before you reach the point where you need those extraordinary expenditures.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** I think there's efforts being made to focus more attention on, you know, how to cut that expenditure down by, you know, the care cycle, having some strategy on high enough care, end of life care, things of that nature.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right. Well, what do you forecast or perceive the next five years of the landscape to be in this area that is focusing on elder abuse and elder justice?

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** I think on the forecast side, I'm going to say, you know, the problem is definitely not diminishing but the response to it, the concern about it, and the efforts being made at all levels is increasing to the extent that it may contribute to the reduction in a short period of time. The more we cooperate and use all the elements and resources available, and have cooperation between the levels of government and the private sector, and you know individual families and individual communities, we can get our arms around this a little bit more.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Yeah, I mean, you know we want to value a population that's clearly aging. We certainly want increases in health care and increases in longevity, and the other phenomenal that I'm sensing is that people are consciencely engaged in life long practices to live longer. I know my children, I think, are a lot more conscious of working out, drinking a lot of water, you know, at a much younger age conscience of what lifestyle do I have for now but also for the long term. And that's a positive phenomena but it also may lead to

longer lives, and then these issues that accompany aging per se, so it's kind of this interesting ying and yang about those issues.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** I think that, you know, one of the things that we talk about up here a lot, and I think it's a growing issue. In fact, it ties to the elder abuse issue. We're dealing with the issue of ageism in this country more and more. And we understand it exists but we need to, you know, figure out more ways to combat it so that we have a better perception of older people going forward.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right. So that really kind of loops back to our earlier point that as a society, will we change, you know, that sort of westernism versus easternism approach to will we value – I know, for example, in the Japanese and Korean culture, they value the wisdom of elderly – their elderly population. And that's a fundamental shift, I think, for us. We're so kind of commercial and consumer driven about youth, but hopefully with the baby boomers, people like yourself and myself, maybe we can change that a little bit. And certainly your entire lifetime endeavor, Bob, to work on important issues dealing with aging and the elderly is a commitment to move that needle a little bit and say this is a valuable population who has a lot to offer. We should value their experience and their impact on society. And conscientiously safeguard them financially and physically and psychologically, in all the ways that we can. So, Bob, particularly, I want to thank you for your lifetime work in this area and commend you for that dedication that you have shown since your early twenties to today and for all of the work that you do and so many organizations on behalf of the elderly. This has been fascinating. We might do a round two when you get your voice back, and also I think we might have some follow-up questions. I am the statewide chair of the Florida Wings Program, which is the working interdisciplinary network of guardianship stakeholders. You can see why we

developed an acronym for that one because it's a mouthful. But all of the issues you've talked about have been surfaced in those stakeholder meetings and I'm hoping that our Wings Program can continue for years and years and be sustainable. I know it's present in a lot of other states and then the federal work that you've done is invaluable to this issue. So I thank you for joining us today and I thank you for your insights. I really appreciate your thoughts in this area.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** Judge Lauten, thank you for the opportunity to be on this podcast with you and this program, and I look forward to working with you in any capacity we can on these very important issues that we've talked about today.

>>**CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Great. Thanks, Bob.

>>**MR. BLANCATO:** Okay, thank you.

>>You've been listening to "Open Ninth: Conversations Beyond the Courtroom," brought to you by Chief Judge Frederick J. Lauten and the Ninth Judicial Circuit Court of Florida. For more information about the Ninth Circuit Court, follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.