

**OPEN NINTH:
CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM
LAND OF OPPORTUNITY
EPISODE 83
SEPTEMBER 16, 2019
HOSTED BY: DONALD A. MYERS, JR.**

(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 Don Myers.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Hello, and welcome to Open Ninth. I’m here today with Osceola County Judge Gabrielle Sanders. Judge Sanders was elected in 2018, becoming the first black judge elected to serve on the bench in Osceola County.

Thanks for joining me today, Gabby.

JUDGE SANDERS: Thank you, Judge.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So let’s start off at the very beginning. You’ve got such an interesting past, and we want to hear about that and some about the journey that you’ve had from your early years to becoming the first Haitian-American judge in the Ninth Judicial Circuit.

So tell me a little bit about your childhood in Haiti.

JUDGE SANDERS: All right. I was born March 12th, 1983, beautiful morning, in the City of Jacmel, Haiti. And it was a pretty awesome childhood, initially. My mom had to leave my brother and I, and she moved to the United States and left us with her mother, my grandmother. And I attended Catholic school. And my brother and I traveled back to the U.S. when I was maybe six or seven years old. And coming to the U.S. and having lived with my mom -- she was a single parent at that time -- and trying to learn a new language was very difficult and become so difficult I -- it kind of created a speech impediment so that it brought kind of like a damper into education, and I was held back because of my speech impediment.

I don’t know, do they still have ESL here?

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: They do, or something like it.

JUDGE SANDERS: Okay. So I was in ESL classes. I went through --

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And ESL, English as a Second Language.

JUDGE SANDERS: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Right.

JUDGE SANDERS: And I went to speech therapists and worked on my speech impediment and eventually learned English very well. And I skipped the fourth -- wait. I skipped the fifth grade and went to sixth grade, so I learned pretty quickly.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Fascinating. So I -- you may have heard me tell this story. But my background is that I was a speech-language pathologist --

JUDGE SANDERS: Really.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: -- before I made the decision to go back to law school. And I had the opportunity for a year to work with students on the island of Kauai in the Hawaiian Islands, and to work with them on speech impediment issues. Some were language issues, but some were just speech issues, learning how to pronounce certain letters or symbols and things like that. I imagine that's the kind of thing that you were struggling with.

JUDGE SANDERS: Yes, exactly.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Yeah. But you overcame it.

JUDGE SANDERS: I did.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And you -- so you were in elementary and then middle and high school here in the State of Florida.

JUDGE SANDERS: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So where did you graduate from high school?

JUDGE SANDERS: I went to Fort Lauderdale High School.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Okay. And where is that?

JUDGE SANDERS: Fort Lauderdale High School is near the beach in Fort Lauderdale. It had a prelaw magnet program, which I was part of, and I did debate and different mock trial competitions down there. It's a great high school.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: That's great. And so reflecting back, you were -- from the time you were born until you were six or so, you were in Haiti?

JUDGE SANDERS: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Okay. And you were being raised by your grandmother --

JUDGE SANDERS: I was.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: -- who must be a very special person to you.

JUDGE SANDERS: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Yeah. Tell me a little bit about her.

JUDGE SANDERS: My grandmother, God rest her soul, passed away my freshman year of college. But she was a very strong, independent woman. And she really helped my mom out when my mom was going through a very difficult time. And she always stressed education. That's one of the reasons why my mom came to the U.S. She was a nurse in Haiti but wanted a better life here, so she went back to school. I think she went to Miami-Dade Community College and just, you know, got her license to be a registered nurse. Did that, got enough money, and then my brother and I came over here.

But, you know, I think she would have been very proud.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: That's great. Now, is your brother older or younger?

JUDGE SANDERS: Older brother, three years apart, and he is an accountant.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Here in Florida as well?

JUDGE SANDERS: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Great. So your family is close, obviously.

JUDGE SANDERS: Yeah, they're all in South Florida.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: That's great. So you graduate high school in a law school magnet program.

JUDGE SANDERS: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And what in the world made you think about law in high school?

JUDGE SANDERS: I've always wanted to be a lawyer. I was even in prelaw in middle school. Yeah. I attended William Dandy Middle School and they had a prelaw program. So my mom said I've always wanted to be a lawyer, so knowing that she made sure that I was in magnet schools and so --

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: What attracted you to the law?

JUDGE SANDERS: I just wanted to help people, that was my main thing. After high school I was really into the Innocence Project.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Tell -- for our listeners who don't know what the Innocence Project is, tell us about that.

JUDGE SANDERS: The Innocence Project is a group of lawyers and volunteers and they pretty much dive into cases where there's potential issues within the case where they can exonerate that individual, whether it be DNA issues or some type of injustice.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Okay. So did you ever aspire to work with the Innocence Project?

JUDGE SANDERS: I did.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Ever have a chance to pursue that?

JUDGE SANDERS: I did not. Let me tell you why. My third year, I did two different clinics at FAMU, and the first clinic was the Homelessness Clinic. And we offered just legal advice about family law, criminal law, just things like that. And I really enjoyed that.

And then I worked at the State Attorney's Office and I interned. And I realized being a prosecutor, you really hold a lot of power. Once the police gives you a charging, you know, affidavit, you have an opportunity to review that to do your own independent investigation. And if it's sufficient evidence, you want to make sure every -- you know, justice was served, then you make a filing decision. And I realized, wow, I actually make a filing decision and I'm the one that actually brings it to trial. And if something happens, I don't know, perhaps someone's rights were violated, I also have that decision to go ahead and drop the case. So I was like, okay, I can be a prosecutor and that would be my part in making things right in the justice system.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So it would really put you on the front lines of the Innocence Project in the sense that, because you would have the authority to make decisions about whether to file a claim in the first place --

JUDGE SANDERS: Exactly.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: -- you could make those prosecutorial decisions and file or not file depending on your own conclusions based on the evidence that's presented.

JUDGE SANDERS: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Interesting. So you -- let's go back to your early days a little bit, if we could.

So you come here from Haiti. Is -- had Haiti been the only place that you had known until you were six or seven?

JUDGE SANDERS: Yes, the only place.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: How was that transition for you?

JUDGE SANDERS: It was difficult. I was bullied a lot. My mom didn't have any family members here. Everyone else was in Haiti, so it was just her, my brother and I. She worked a lot, so we were home taking -- my brother took care of me, and it was -- at the beginning, it was very difficult -- a very difficult transition.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And how about culturally; any significant issues there?

JUDGE SANDERS: Culturally, I -- the food. The food was different. I remember riding in the car for the first time was very exciting to me.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Yeah.

JUDGE SANDERS: Just -- everything was just so different.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Have you ever returned to Haiti?

JUDGE SANDERS: I have.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: How recently?

JUDGE SANDERS: Gosh, it's -- we went back in 2007.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And what impacted you most about that trip? What was it that just you walked away from that travel experience by saying, wow?

JUDGE SANDERS: It was difficult because a lot of my mom's immediate family had passed away, so I never understood why she was -- because she's kind of like a helicopter mom, so I didn't realize, you know, why she was always so clingy and why she stressed education and, you know, trying to make my brother and I work really hard and trying to be successful, until we went back to Haiti and just having to see, like, how my cousins were living and how everything else looked, it was just -- it was hard to see.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: I don't want to get too personal, but when you watched family members living there, you saw things -- the world as it is in Haiti -- was -- that was difficult for you?

JUDGE SANDERS: Yes, absolutely. Knowing that there's just brilliant minds there and not having anyone to foster and just -- into them, and just not having the education opportunities, it's like you don't want to take things for granted, you know. And it's -- it was hard. It was hard to see.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Yeah. So for our listeners, Haiti is a part of an island with the Dominican Republic.

JUDGE SANDERS: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Kind of half-and-half, I suppose, through a mountain range, is that right?

JUDGE SANDERS: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Did you ever travel to the Dominican Republic during your time there?

JUDGE SANDERS: Not in 2008 [sic]. But I did go back to the Dominican Republic maybe 2015. Because my mom is Haitian and Dominican.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Okay.

JUDGE SANDERS: So she speaks Creole, French and Spanish.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Now, what languages do you speak currently?

JUDGE SANDERS: I only speak English, and I blame my mom. But, you know, just -- it was just hard just learning English. And as you know, when a child is learning a new language, they tend to develop speech impediments. And I was horrible. I stuttered all the time.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Wow. That's --

JUDGE SANDERS: So they told her only one language, and that's what it was, English.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: You've made an amazing transition. Your English is beautiful.

JUDGE SANDERS: Thank you.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So you graduated from high school in Fort Lauderdale, and you still had your sights set on working in the law, is that right?

JUDGE SANDERS: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Okay. So where did you go to college?

JUDGE SANDERS: University of South Florida.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And what was your undergrad degree in?

JUDGE SANDERS: English and American Literature.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Really? Fascinating.

JUDGE SANDERS: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Why?

JUDGE SANDERS: I love Shakespeare. I know; weird.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: I don't hear that very often. So you have an appreciation for the Old English style and writing and --

JUDGE SANDERS: Old -- yes. Reading poetry and interpreting Lord Byron and things like that. I just love it.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: That's fascinating. And then to law school.

JUDGE SANDERS: Actually, I took a break.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Okay.

JUDGE SANDERS: I wanted to make sure -- going in, I was a Poli Sci major. That was so boring. I couldn't do it. So I switched over to English and American Literature. But I decided to take a year off because I wanted to make sure the law was what I still wanted to do. I worked as an accountant for an electrical company in Pompano, Florida. And after that year, I took the LSAT and I went to FAMU.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: That's great. So you -- accounting.

JUDGE SANDERS: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: That's what you said your brother does. Was he an influence on you in that choice?

JUDGE SANDERS: Yes. I love my big brother.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Okay.

JUDGE SANDERS: Very smart guy.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So you end up at FAMU. And you graduated when?

JUDGE SANDERS: May 2009.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Any experiences at FAMU or at law school that you just look back and go, man, I'm so glad I did that?

JUDGE SANDERS: Oh, yeah. I mean, FAMU has great professors, and they really, really care about their students and wanted to make sure that once we left FAMU that we would be the best litigators. They really focused on that. And they had a really, really great trial advocacy program. I was part of their mock trial team. It was -- FAMU is great.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Trial team -- I was a trial team member at the University of Florida.

JUDGE SANDERS: All right.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: I was lecturing the other day and was sharing with the students that some of my very best learning moments came between midnight and 2:00 in the morning when you're up arguing about an evidentiary objection and who's right, who's wrong, and how the judge could possibly rule your way, when you get into the nuances of the hearsay rule and those things. And that's just some valuable experiences.

So you graduate, and you come out of FAMU and your first job, again, was?

JUDGE SANDERS: State Attorney's Office.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: State Attorney's Office. Tell us a little bit about the types of cases that you handled while you were there.

JUDGE SANDERS: It varied from County court, your simple DUI's, batteries, to DUI manslaughters, vehicular homicide. I was the homicide prosecutor in Osceola County. We did a lot.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Wow. So big, heavy cases.

JUDGE SANDERS: Big, heavy cases.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Yeah. And in the midst of all of that, you decided, gee, I'd like to be a judge.

JUDGE SANDERS: I did.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Tell us about that.

JUDGE SANDERS: Oh, my gosh. Okay. So I started thinking about becoming a judge maybe I would say around five years into being a prosecutor. I was in front of so many different judges, and I always say that, you know, the judge sets the tone of the courtroom. And I had a teaching judge, and my teaching judge made sure that I knew my rules. He would tell me, what

is that statute, Ms. Sanders; where's your statute book. He always made sure to instill that in me so when I went to another judge who was completely different I was reciting rules all the time. And he -- I would hope he appreciated it.

And then just seeing different styles. And I always -- you know, always say that, you know, my judges that I was in front of were mentors to me. And I was like, I want to do something like that.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So do you see opportunities for yourself on the bench, then, to mentor younger lawyers that come in front of you?

JUDGE SANDERS: Oh, absolutely. Especially in County court. You get so many young attorneys who've never even stepped foot in the courtroom, and it's your opportunity to, you know, kind of tell them, okay, this is what's going on, this is what my expectations are. And when I rule a certain way, I like to explain why I'm ruling.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Good.

JUDGE SANDERS: That is my teaching method.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So you've got a couple of judges that you aspire to be like and to do what they do. But what is it that finally turns the switch for you? What caused you to make the decision, now I'm going to go ahead and run?

JUDGE SANDERS: I think it was just time. I think timing is everything. At that point I was the Deputy Bureau Chief. I'd done everything with the State Attorney's Office. And I knew some spots were going to be available. And I honestly -- I was talking myself out of it because I just didn't think that I could do it. I guess that's where the self-doubt comes in.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Particular obstacles? Was there something that you were concerned about for yourself or because of who you are or -- tell us about that.

JUDGE SANDERS: I thought about, like, my age, maybe I was too young. Then I started thinking about the other judges that I knew. I'm like, okay, well, you know, they were 36 at the time that, you know, they became a judge. I'm like, all right, well, that's not going to work, I can't talk myself out of the age factor.

And then I'm like, okay, then I thought about the race factor, like, Osceola, I'm a black woman, I'm like, it's never going to happen. And I started talking to my parents, some of my friends; like, what's the worst that can happen, you're not going to get fired. You put your name in, you know, you raise money to campaign and you see what happens. If you lose, you lose; at least you tried.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And obviously you were successful.

JUDGE SANDERS: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Yeah. And that's fabulous. So tell me, you've been on the bench for how long now?

JUDGE SANDERS: Oh, gosh, eight months.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Right about eight months?

JUDGE SANDERS: Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: What's the biggest challenge about the job that you've found?

JUDGE SANDERS: Oh, it's -- this is a tough job, let me tell you. As a litigator, I used to say, I'm just going to present my case, at the end of the day it's the judge's decision. Now, I'm just like, it's actually my decision. Like, everything hinges on what I say, and it's a lot of pressure. It is a lot of pressure, and it's hard. It's hard work. And landlord/tenant, that's something that's very difficult.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So you're on the Civil bench now in the County.

JUDGE SANDERS: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And that's not an area that you've practiced in.

JUDGE SANDERS: No.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So how would you describe the learning curve?

JUDGE SANDERS: It's not as bad as I thought it would be. I was a little overwhelmed at first. But just -- I mean, working with the Ninth is amazing. I have a lot of great mentors. Mentors like you, Judge Weiss, I mean, Judge Murphy, Judge Morgan, just everyone just reaching out to me and just making sure that everything's all right. I have all my books. So it wasn't that bad.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So what do you wish that people knew about being a judge?

JUDGE SANDERS: Being a judge -- let me see. Besides the fact that it's very hard, it could be very isolating. It could be very isolating. I'm so used to being around a lot of people, a lot of my colleagues, and seeing them every day and going to different places. And -- but I understand why the isolation, but it's new for me.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Fair. Stressful, the work?

JUDGE SANDERS: It has its days.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: When it has its days, how do you manage that? What's your outlet?

JUDGE SANDERS: I run; I work out.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Okay. Good. How long; what distances do you run?

JUDGE SANDERS: At most, five.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Miles?

JUDGE SANDERS: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Wow.

JUDGE SANDERS: I'm sure I could go much longer, but five is what it is right now.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: That's funny. All right. Good.

So just some random questions.

JUDGE SANDERS: Okay.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Worst job ever?

JUDGE SANDERS: Worst job ever, Wendy's. Oh, my goodness. Talk about customer service. That would be my worst job.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: All right. What was the very first career you dreamed of as a child; was it the law?

JUDGE SANDERS: It was. It was. Being a lawyer. I don't -- I can't think of any other time that I would have wanted to do anything else.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?

JUDGE SANDERS: One thing about myself. Oh, boy. Maybe I'm too nice.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Don't change that. That's not the thing you should change.

How about a little-known thing about yourself that others would be surprised to learn?

JUDGE SANDERS: I'm a great cook. I can cook very well.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: What style of cooking?

JUDGE SANDERS: Haitian food, American food. I love to bake. I make a really good cheesecake, Judge.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Sold. All right. We'll have to make that an event.

Where are you your happiest?

JUDGE SANDERS: Home.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Home with family?

JUDGE SANDERS: Home with family.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Good. And who's been your inspiration?

JUDGE SANDERS: My mom.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Yeah, you told us about her. That's great.

Well, Judge Sanders, welcome to the Ninth Circuit.

JUDGE SANDERS: Thank you.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: We're sorry it took this long to get you onto the podcast but thrilled to be able to share some of your story with you. And we're excited to see how the future is for you as a young judge here in the Ninth Circuit. Thank you.

JUDGE SANDERS: All right. Thank you for having me.

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