

OPEN NINTH:
CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM
THE OCBA, THE COMMUNITY, AND YOU
EPISODE 85
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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 Jenny Brown, the new Executive Director of the Orange County Bar Association. She comes to the OCBA with over 15 years’ experience in the nonprofit sector, bringing with her a wealth of expertise in marketing and membership organizations. She holds an MBA from the Crummer Graduate School of Business at Rollins College and a Certified Association Executive Designation from the American Society of Association Executives.

We’re thrilled to have you here today, Jenny. Thank you for joining us.

JENNY BROWN: Thank you for having me.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: If you would, just tell us a little bit about your background, to start things off.

JENNY BROWN: Sure. Well, I’m originally from Boise, Idaho. I went to Boise State University -- go, Broncos -- got my Marketing Degree there, and then I moved to Central Florida and I started working in the nonprofit sector. Worked in higher education with the Rollins College Philanthropy & Nonprofit Leadership Center, which kind of functions like an association for nonprofit organizations in the area. It does education, training, resources.

And most recently, prior to coming to the Bar Association, I was at the American Academy of Optometry, which is a national association for optometrists and vision scientists. So I’ve kind of followed this strange path of association management in my career, but I’ve really developed an affinity for associations in general and what they do.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So you and I probably understand what associations are. But what is that animal?

JENNY BROWN: Yeah. So there is pretty much an association for any kind of profession. There is an association for, you know, engineers, all of the medical professions, obviously bar associations.

So they are groups that provide, you know, education, training, resources, in addition to a lot of them do lobbying efforts so many are based in D.C. so they're -- they have close proximity to the Hill, or in our case in Florida a lot of them are in Tallahassee. So our bar association is a local, you know, Orange County Bar Association, but --

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And what is it about the idea of the association makeup that attracts you?

JENNY BROWN: Yeah. I actually -- people don't really realize the role that associations play in really improving the quality of products and services that the end consumers get. You know, for example, associations are training -- in our example of attorneys, we're training attorneys, we are providing them with resources, we are -- it's a place where people come together in a way -- you know, in day-to-day life they may be competitors or, you know, opposing counsel, but they come together in comradery, in friendship, and to hold each other to really high standards. And that ultimately benefits the public who's, you know, getting those services.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So you came to the Orange County Bar Association when?

JENNY BROWN: About four months ago. So I'm new to the profession, that's for sure. Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, welcome. So what was it about the Orange County Bar Association that attracted you out of the work you were doing?

JENNY BROWN: Yeah. What was really unique about the Orange County Bar Association that drew me to it was the requirement that in order to be a member of the Orange County Bar, you have to do two pro bono cases a year or pay a fee to Legal Aid. I mean, as someone with kind of a business background, that's not always the best business case. You know, we could probably get more members if we didn't have that requirement. But it's so important that it stuck through the times, and that, to me, is something I can -- certainly saw myself getting behind.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, that -- it's an incredibly valuable thing that lawyers in our community do, to volunteer to take those pro bono cases. I can recall in my practice as a young lawyer taking on a case involving a child that had been born addicted to drugs from birth, and the challenges of working with that family. For me, a time period that lasted longer than ten years.

JENNY BROWN: Wow. Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And so the work that our local lawyers do to contribute in that way to Legal Aid really is an incredibly valuable thing.

JENNY BROWN: Absolutely. Absolutely.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: That's great. So you have been there about four months now. And you don't get to make all the decisions on your own.

JENNY BROWN: No, not necessarily. No. We have an Executive Council of 18 attorneys. So the way I look at it is, they kind of hired me to run the business piece of it. But I

do, you know, obviously serve as an advisor to the board and do give them advice and my thoughts on what ways in which we should proceed. So --

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So what do you envision happening in this first year? What's your focus?

JENNY BROWN: Yeah, my -- I have a few areas where I'm really kind of doing a deep dive right now to really understand better. One is, you know, there is a little bit of a negative perception sometimes of attorneys from the public. You know, I think they may -- for whatever reason, bad TV or what, they mistrust lawyers. But it's kind of a mismatch between -- you know, I don't think anyone really gets in the profession of practicing law if they didn't really, intrinsically want to help people on some level. So there is like, you know, a bit of a mismatch there.

And so I'm kind of looking at ways perhaps that the Bar can work to bridge that gap in that, you know, highlighting all the wonderful things our attorneys are doing; pro bono; our -- we have 29 committees and many of them are doing events and holding events that are, you know, based in philanthropy, raising money for the community; our Young Lawyers Section is really active in giving back. So making people aware of that, but also making people aware of -- we have a lot of community programs that I don't think a lot of people are aware of, as well.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Tell us a little bit about those community programs. What are the types of things that the Bar does in the community?

JENNY BROWN: Sure. We have a Lawyer Referral & Information Service, so that's a phone line that we have open. Members of the community can call in or log onto our website and basically ask questions. If they are not sure if they have a case, if they're looking for resources in some way that might help them with their legal needs, we kind of talk them through

that. If they do -- we do feel they need an attorney, we'll match them with someone who's in their particular area what they need. A lot of people don't always know what type of attorney they need to help with their problem, so we help solve that.

And then also, you know, if -- not everyone obviously qualifies for Legal Aid, but not everyone can always afford an attorney. So we have a Modest Means Panel that's part of that, so we've got people who've agreed to really offer reduced prices to help people who can't necessarily afford it.

And then in addition, we have a Citizen's Dispute Mediation Program. It's completely free to any member of Orange County -- any citizen in Orange County who needs help with a civil matter. So it's a way that we can bring them together with a mediator to help keep -- you know, solve those disputes outside of the courtroom. So that's a great resource.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And of course you have the Legal Aid partnership and then the Bar Foundation as well, right?

JENNY BROWN: Right. Yes. So we have a foundation that's really focused on providing scholarships for legal studies students.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Great.

JENNY BROWN: So, yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So how is that accomplished? How do they go about that process?

JENNY BROWN: Well, they -- we -- they raise money through our events. So all of our social events at the Orange County Bar -- we have all kinds of -- we have a trivia -- we just had a trivia event, for example. We will -- actually, the proceeds of those go to our foundation.

So we do have some events which we raise money for Legal Aid. Some of them are split between the two. But those are kind of how they get their funds for that.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Okay.

JENNY BROWN: Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: How many folks -- how many lawyers here belong to the Bar?

JENNY BROWN: There are just over 3,000.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Wow.

JENNY BROWN: Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And are all of the members lawyers, or there are some that are non-lawyers?

JENNY BROWN: There are some non-lawyers. So there are paralegals, we have members of the judiciary who are members, law students, paralegal students. So we have kind of a wide variety of membership options.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Great. If you are a member of the Orange County Bar, what are some of the benefits available to you through the Bar?

JENNY BROWN: Sure. Well, you do get -- one of the big benefits is you get free luncheons. So we do a monthly luncheon where we'll bring in a really dynamic speaker. We'll partner sometimes with other local voluntary bars. And that's included in your membership. So you can come network, you can come here -- you know, what's going on with the Bar and meet with your colleagues.

Also, one of the big benefits is the networking aspect. I mean, obviously, you know, one thing I've learned being new to this arena is lawyer-to-lawyer referral is a huge thing. People

need to build their business and we offer kind of the hub to allow people to do that and meet other people. And we have 29 different committees, so it's an opportunity -- and we don't charge extra for people to be a member of committees like, you know, some other associations do. So you can join substantive law committees, get involved in areas that you really are passionate about.

There are other -- you know, obviously, we have *The Briefs* magazine, which is a great magazine we still mail to people. And, you know, it's very well received and well respected. So those are just a few things.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: You know, I have the privilege and opportunity to travel throughout the state on judicial business, and one thing I hear consistently, regardless of where I am, is that the Orange County Bar is the best bar association in the state, many people feel in the country.

JENNY BROWN: I would agree with that.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Why?

JENNY BROWN: I -- well, you know, I have some theories. Again, I'm only four months in. My theory is that because we have the pro bono requirement, to me that -- people who get involved or people who are members of the Bar, that's an extra special connection with our organization, coming together in service, you know, like we do.

And people want to volunteer. It's blowing my mind that we have over a hundred very active, very busy lawyers who want to volunteer on our committees and leadership roles. That's magic to me, you know, because we have a very small staff. We have 11 staff members and we can't do it all, obviously. But the passion that they have for it has really taken me by surprise. It's great.

And also I think, you know, our partnership with the judiciary is so great. I mean, the judges come to our events, and I don't know if you're aware -- you probably are -- if we can get judges to come to our events, then we can get attorneys, we can fill the room. So that's certainly helpful. That adds value for our members.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: There -- I have seen some promotional materials from time to time where the Orange County Bar reaches out to address some diversity and inclusion issues. Tell me a little bit about that.

JENNY BROWN: Well, one of the things that we've recently done is -- well, we have a Diversity & Inclusion Committee that is doing great things. They have a seminar coming up on implicit bias in jury selection. You know, they're really active.

And then we have a new campaign, it's called This Is My OCBA. So we've taken photographs of a lot of our members and we've made this -- these really beautiful collages that kind of showcase the diversity in the way -- I mean, not only in the way people look but their personalities are shining through. And we're taking it a step further. It's on social media where we're highlighting one of our members each week just letting people know a little bit more about them, you know, that you might not see on the surface or get to know in just passing, talking to them.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: I love it.

JENNY BROWN: Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: I've seen it on Facebook -- on the social media. And I love not just the idea of that photograph where you really do get to see a -- I think a piece of folks' personality --

JENNY BROWN: Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: -- but also the comments and things that they make about why the Bar matters to them.

JENNY BROWN: Absolutely. And, you know, we do have several local -- other local voluntary bars in the area who have formed and we've really -- we don't look at it in a way like we're competing for members. Some people kind of feel like -- that ask me if that's happening, I'm like, not at all. I mean, we ban together. We invite them -- actually the leaders to our board meetings every month. And we work collaboratively. We make sure that we're not having big events on the same dates. We co-sponsor things, cross-promote. So it's really a great community of just voluntary bars in the area too.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: I think I've been a member of the Orange County Bar Association since 1989, which was the first year I was licensed to practice as a lawyer.

JENNY BROWN: Wow. Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And obviously the membership in the Bar has grown so dramatically.

JENNY BROWN: Right.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: We find ourselves with more than 3,000 members now, as you indicated.

Are there any trends that you're seeing in membership of associations like this one?

JENNY BROWN: Yes. So across the board in bar associations and really in all associations, there's kind of this idea that membership is not just something you automatically do when you enter a profession. It used to be you graduate, you join the, you know, association. But I think it's a function of -- and a lot of people are saying specifically Millennials, Millennials aren't joiners, they're not going to join the association. But I don't know necessarily, (a), that

they've met our Young Lawyers Section -- but that's another discussion. They're facing some issues that, you know, are really unprecedented. I mean, student loan debt is astronomical and they're graduating into, you know, an area where there -- you know, salaries are not maybe where their predecessors were, job prospects aren't what they may have expected. So they're just more careful with where they spend their money.

But that being said, I don't buy that they're not joiners because look at the success of Amazon Prime and Netflix and, you know, even the six-dollar coffee people buy every day. You know, so I think that people just really spend money on what they value. And sometimes I think, especially as you're just starting in a profession, you're trying to get on your feet, you're struggling perhaps, you don't always -- it's not always clear to see how a bar association can help you until you have someone who can say, hey, you know, here are some resources for you, the bar is the place to be.

So it might just take -- it's just a little bit of -- a few years to get -- to really see the value in it. And it's our role as an association to keep innovating, thinking of ways that we can meet member needs and really understand what they find valuable, what keeps them up at night, how can we help moving the profession forward.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: That's fantastic. You know, one of the things that the bench values so much is the partnership that we have with the Orange County Bar Association, its members and the opportunity to be able to spend time with lawyers to teach, to mentor, to be taught sometimes. And I know on the near horizon is the Bench Bar Conference. Tell us a little bit about that.

JENNY BROWN: Yes. So our Bench Bar Conference we do every two years, and it's really become a signature event for us. So it's a full day of different breakout sessions. We're

offering 55 different sessions this year. It's going to be April 3rd, 2020, at the Loews Pacific -- Royal Pacific out at Universal.

So what's special about it is, it is one day where judges, lawyers, paralegals, what-have-you, all come together for a day of learning and exchange. We have several judges who are, you know, teaching sessions. We -- our keynote session will be Chief Judges from around the state just talking about hot topics. And so it's really valuable. The feedback from it -- from people who have attended in the past is really good.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Great. How could a lawyer register for that if they were looking to --

JENNY BROWN: Not quite -- I mean, after January 1st, people can register for that. So --

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: All right. Great. Well, in your view -- as you said, you've been there for four months -- you've had a chance now to witness, I think, how it is that the OCBA operates. Do you see the OCBA in the community? I guess you've talked some about the Lawyer Referral & Information Service, the Dispute Resolution or Mediation services. Do you see lawyers engaged in the community in other ways?

JENNY BROWN: Well, definitely through our Young Lawyers Section, you know, they are holding all kinds of really engaging, fun events that have charitable components. They are raising -- they've won awards for what they've done. It's really remarkable.

And then not just that but other committees are also doing the same thing. It's really kind of a very dynamic -- so many things going on. And most of it is focused on how can we ensure everyone has access to justice and also, you know, what are other ways we can just help the community as humans. So --

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And how about mentorship opportunities? Are there -- you described a circumstance of some young lawyers recently graduating, lots of student loan debt and job availability just not what it perhaps used to be.

JENNY BROWN: Yeah. Right. We do have a New Lawyer Training Program. And one of the unique -- first of all, it was fabulous. I attended it as someone new to the profession. It's a two-day intensive program that gives you everything you need to know to get up and running. But one of the aspects of that is you are assigned -- we had about 50 people who participated and they were assigned a mentor who had been in the profession for a while. And I think that's invaluable.

I mean, I don't think anyone who's had any kind of success in life hasn't had some kind of a mentor that really believed in you. But it's awkward for someone who's young and just coming in, you know, looking at someone they admire and asking them to be a mentor or -- they just don't do it. It's just -- they just think they don't have time or they didn't want to do it. So this provides a structure for them to really have a relationship that's beneficial.

So -- and then the Young Lawyers Section has their own mentoring program for law students. So we're, you know, trying to cover the bases there.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So lots of opportunities for young lawyers and young lawyer wannabes.

JENNY BROWN: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Okay. What do you see, Jenny, as the biggest challenge that the Bar faces in the next year or two?

JENNY BROWN: I would say the member-value question, I mean, that you had asked me earlier is really the issue. I don't know that we're necessarily seeing an issue now, but I've

been thinking a lot about making sure that we're innovating. I think associations in general tend to kind of keep the same membership model and kind of keep plugging along. But things change in the environment that may change what our members need, and that will ultimately drive membership amounts.

So that's kind of my focus right now is -- and overall, I know that the profession isn't growing. I think it was .7 -- the ABA came out with something .7 percent growth. So it makes sense that we might not be, you know, growing exponentially. But that's okay, as long as we're doing what our members need. So --

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Any sense of what the untapped market is in Central Florida?

JENNY BROWN: Last time I looked at it, it's about 50/50; 50 percent join and 50 percent aren't.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So there could easily be a bar of over 6,000.

JENNY BROWN: It could.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: That would be exciting.

JENNY BROWN: It could. It would be very exciting.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: That's fabulous.

JENNY BROWN: Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, Jenny, I just appreciate so much you coming here, sharing with us a little bit about the Bar and its current state and your new involvement in it. We want to welcome you again to the community of lawyers. I know you've been a part of the Orlando area now for a time.

JENNY BROWN: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: But we're excited to have you. Love what we've been seeing at the luncheons and other things since you've been here, and excited to watch as you grow with the organization.

JENNY BROWN: Great. Thank you.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Thank you.

JENNY BROWN: Thanks so much for having me.

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

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