

**OPEN NINTH:**  
**CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM**  
**FROM GAVEL TO HAMMER**  
**EPISODE 60**  
**OCTOBER 29, 2018**  
**HOSTED BY: FREDERICK J. LAUTEN**

(Music)

>> 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:** Hello, and welcome to Open Ninth. I’m your host, Chief Judge Fred Lauten. And today I have the pleasure of sitting down with my colleagues to talk about their recent mission trip to South America where they spent a week volunteering to -- their time to build homes in -- for families in Honduras.

If you’ll let me -- allow me to introduce our guests, I’m going to start straight ahead of me, Circuit Judge Lisa Munyon, to my right is Circuit Judge Mike Murphy, sitting next to Judge Munyon is County Court Judge Steve Jewett, right next to me is my good friend and Circuit Court Judge Mark Blechman.

And then we’re thrilled to have with us the host of the trip and former trial court judge from our circuit who is now sitting on the Florida Supreme Court. It’s been about almost 18 to 20 years since we’ve had a judge from the Ninth Circuit who sits on the Florida Supreme Court, so we’re thrilled to welcome our good friend and our colleague, Justice Alan Lawson.

So, Justice Lawson, I have learned that you’ve been making trips to Honduras for years. Can you tell us, sort of, when that began in your lifetime, and how you got attracted to that location, and a little bit about your experiences going there?

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** My first trip was in 1999, and it was just happenstance that it was Honduras. I had a good friend -- still a friend -- who’s a cardiologist and was taking a trip with his wife to that country and wanted us to go. My wife and his wife are friends, and it just worked out for us to go on that trip.

And while we were there, a little girl walked into this clinic in the southern part of the country, with her mother -- actually, probably was carried in -- and was sitting there, who was 12 years old and looked like she was 7. She was completely underdeveloped because her heart was turned around the wrong way in her body and only about a third of her blood got to her lungs to get oxygen. And it was literally a miracle that this kid was even alive at 12. She had never been able to go to school because she would have had to walk, and she couldn't walk across the room because her -- she just couldn't get oxygen to the muscles, which is why she was so underdeveloped.

And so her mom, since she had been born, had been bringing her to every American group that came saying, can you please do something for my kid. It's a surgery that's done in infancy here. It's three corrective surgeries. And it's not available anywhere in -- even if you have money, there's no facility, no surgeon that can do that surgery in Honduras or most Central American countries.

And so Julie, my wife, came to me and said, we've got to do something. And I'm the more practical one and I was like, well, I don't know what we can do. We talked to the folks down there -- and even our friend the cardiologist, and he said, you know, if she could even survive the airplane flight, and if you could find a doctor with the skill willing to donate his time in a hospital, willing to donate the facilities, and on and on and on, it would be almost impossible for the government of the United States to give a poor Honduran kid a Visa in time, because it's a miracle she's alive now; we don't know how much time she has, but it probably would take six months or a year.

And to make a long story short, three weeks later she was in Orlando at Arnold Palmer and had that life-saving surgery.

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

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** And lived with us for a year. So now, you know, she was here through Thanksgiving with my family, through Christmas with my family, got to know my kids, she slept in my daughter's room. My daughter learned Spanish. They were about the same age. And our next trip down was to build a home for that family --

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

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** -- and so -- and it was all my friends and my family. And then we had, essentially, a kid in Honduras that we wanted to see, so we started doing annual trips every year to do some service thing. At first we did it with our kids' school and with their -- or church groups, and we would just do some -- every year and go down, but spend time with that kid. And then that turned into a lifelong thing.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** That first trip in 1999, did you have any idea you'd have an experience like the one you had?

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** Oh, no, not at all.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** So you were going down there, what, just to help build, initially, or feed --

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** That was a medical trip, so I was doing sort of triage. I actually went through EMT school and worked my way through college and part of law school on ambulances, so I had that -- I could take a blood pressure and do that kind of thing. So -- and there's plenty to do on a trip like that when you're serving hundreds of people a day, so that was the first trip.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** So that's unbelievable. What a story.

Any -- other than Justice Lawson, any of you who've been on a mission trip before in your life, or was this the first one?

>> **JUDGE MUNYON:** I have.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Judge Munyon, why don't you tell us about that?

>> **JUDGE MUNYON:** When my daughter was in middle school, she and I would go down to an orphanage in Mexico. And we would go for, typically, a week at a time, and we would volunteer our time at the orphanage. We did that through our church group. We had a great time, and it was a valuable learning experience.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** And so for the three -- have you been on a mission trip before that?

>> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** I did. My synagogue went to Cuba a number of years ago. And the story has it that Castro's grandmother was Jewish, so when he took over, he let Judaism continue to exist in the country. And there are three ongoing synagogues now, and we brought supplies to them because, although they exist, they don't have supplies and necessary medical supplies. And so we went on a mission trip there for a couple weeks.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Fabulous.

So three of you, experienced; two of you, kind of rookies. Did the rookies get pretty good advice from this experienced crew? How did that go, Judge Jewett?

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** No advice.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Of course not.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** I had no idea -- you know, and at first when I got the email from Justice Lawson about it, I thought, this sounds like a great idea. And my wife said, yeah, you

definitely should do that. So I'm like, okay, we're going to do this. And then the more I thought about it I was like, you know, what the hell am I going to do.

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

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** How am I going to -- I can barely, you know, take some paste and put paper together, much less bang, you know, nails and build a house. So I was completely unsure what was going to happen.

We did get a couple of emails from Justice Lawson saying, this is the things you need to bring.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Okay. Well, that was kind.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** Yeah. Like, what kind of clothes and, you know, a First-Aid kit and stuff. And you're sort of reading, and so it was all -- you know, I kind of thought I was prepared in that way. I was like, I'm going to have my supplies. I bought one of those LifeStraws that you can suck water through that purifies the water, because I'd heard that one thing was even in the hotel you can't drink the water.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Interesting.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** So I'm like, I'm going to be ready for that, and stuff like that. But -- you know, and bring snacks and things like that. But absolutely no clue and could not have been prepared, really, for what we did.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Why is that? Why couldn't you have been prepared?

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** I don't think that being a privileged person raised in -- first of all, you -- if you're born in this country, you've hit the lottery.

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

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** Just from the start.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Okay.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** And, you know, growing up, my father was an attorney and was a municipal court judge, my mother, you know, was a teacher. But I never really wanted for anything in my life. And so poverty, to me, has really been a concept and things that, you know, I've tried to fight against and tried to help out where I could, but never really experienced anything like what you experience when you get down there and you see this is true, true poverty. It's eye-opening, and it's sad.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Okay. Judge Murphy, how about you? Did you feel prepared to at least arrive?

>> **JUDGE MURPHY:** Well, that -- I was prepared. Luckily in my life I'd been to Guatemala and Costa Rica a total of over 25 times in my life. So seeing the kind of layout, I was ready for that. But what I wasn't ready for is building a home that someone was going to live in. And we were assured once -- before we got there that -- you know, don't worry, you'll be taught, everything will be taken care of, no problem. And as it turned out, it was like that. But as far as the layout, I've seen that before.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Well, if you're completely mechanically challenged like I am, what skill set do they allow you to use when you're building a residence for somebody?

>> **JUDGE MURPHY:** Hammering.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** Hammer.

>> **JUDGE MUNYON:** A hammer.

>> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** We all hammered a lot.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Okay.

>> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** The only mechanical equipment we had, I believe, was one chainsaw, and so --

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Oh, boy. I wouldn't be allowed near that. But -- so who operated that?

>> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** It was passed around. If somebody wanted to, they were allowed to do it.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Gotcha. Gotcha.

>> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** But mostly the more experienced people used it.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** Well, and quite honestly, there was a younger lady that helped out with building both homes, and her name was --

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** Onyeda.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** Yes. She was a surgeon with the chainsaw. It was incredible to watch her work that thing.

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

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** I got to use it one time and just hacked the side of this building up. But she was incredible; just amazing.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Let's talk a little bit about the journey there. Any interesting stories about getting from here to there that any of you want to share?

>> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** The night or two before we left, Judge Murphy had sent me an article about the airport in Tegucigalpa indicating that at one time it was the most dangerous airport on the planet for landing, and now it's upgraded. It's now the most dangerous airport in the western hemisphere.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Why would you send him an email like that?



>> **JUDGE MURPHY:** Because that's the kind of friend I am.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** That's an excellent question, because he did the same thing to me. You know, he said -- what he told me was, when -- because we didn't even know we were going on the trip. It was literally at a judges' meeting where he mentioned something about, oh, you know, this is happening and it may cost me my life. And I'm like, oh, I gotta hear this story. And he started telling me how he was going to go on this trip. And I went, wait a second; I think I'm going on that trip. And he goes -- and then he says, did you happen -- have you looked at the State Department's website.

And, you know, the State Department will have travel advisories for different countries around the world, and there's different levels of advisory. The most -- the worst one is just basically do not go; and that's like Syria and places like that. The second one is traveler -- you know, rethink travel, or something, and Honduras was in that group. You know, I had no -- I mean, I was thinking, okay, it's Honduras, it's not that bad.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Well, come on, now. It had to be reassuring to know you weren't flying into the most dangerous airport in the world but only the most dangerous airport in the western hemisphere.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** Well, we got that afterwards.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Oh, I see.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** So on that website, what they suggest you do if you're going to go to Honduras is have a Proof of Life protocol with people who are -- that you leave in the country, so if you do get kidnapped, or in some way, there could be code words and things that could -- so they could actually prove that you're alive. When -- you know, I'm reading this stuff

and I'm like, wait a second, you know, what is he doing to us. It was crazy. And then he says, oh, I know you've read that, but don't look at the airport stuff. And then he sent me a link.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** So I guess the lesson, if you're traveling ever with Judge Murphy, is bring a lot of anti-anxiety medication.

>> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** Don't read his email.

>> **JUDGE MUNYON:** Yeah, don't read his email. Yeah.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Don't communicate with him at all.

Well, talk to me about your first day in Honduras. What were your very first impressions?

Well, yours, you kind of -- I don't know if that was immediate --

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** Well, the airport was interesting, because what we were told was that there will -- you know, that everyone will sort of kind of get there at the same time. And as it turned out, I think I was the last person to arrive. So everyone was waiting in the lobby of the airport, and I had my suitcase and my backpack and I'm wheeling it in, and the first thing that happens is somebody -- I see them across the way. Somebody comes up to me and says, Mr. Steve; grabs my bag and just goes. And so I feel like, well, wait a second --

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Hope that guy's with our party.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** Right. He knew my name so maybe I'm okay. But I -- if I'm not -- if he doesn't -- really he's not with us, then I just lost my stuff. As it turns out it was fine, and then we had to change some money.

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

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** You know, because we needed to change our dollars, and there's a person that Justice Lawson's been using for a while. And the guy just comes up, and you can

tell how that works. But you just -- I gave him, I think, three or four hundred dollars and I got back, like, eight thousand -- this huge stack of money, and I went, boy, I'm rich. But that was the first impression for me, it was like, wow.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** So how far from the airport to your residence or where you're staying while you were there? Was that a lengthy trip?

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** No, it was through the city. The airport -- the current airport is really close to Downtown Tegucigalpa, which is the capital of Honduras, and we stayed even closer to the center of that city. But it was maybe a 10-minute drive.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** All right. So when --

>> **JUDGE MURPHY:** It was in luxury transportation on a, what, old converted school bus with the --

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** An old U.S. school bus.

>> **JUDGE MUNYON:** Yeah.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** That's great. That's great. Did you get an escort, or was it like you were on your own?

So when did construction start? Was it the next day? How long --

>> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** For us, it started the next day. For the people that were going to help build the house and live in it, it started the night before, in the rain, when they carried a truckload of wood that was cut that day and brought it up to the top of the mountain for us to start our construction first thing in the morning the next day.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** So who was the construction manager on this project, by the way?

>> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** Mark.

>> **JUDGE MUNYON:** Mark.

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** Mark Connell is one of my close personal friends, and he lives in Tegus.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** All right.

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** And he volunteers and stays down there, and there are friends of his that he's had for a long time that sort of support he and his wife there. But he serves the teams, and they will bring thousands of people in a summer down to do what we did.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Wow.

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** And he coordinates the wood, finds the places to build, and works in those neighborhoods. Which is why it is safe despite what you'll read on the U.S. State Department website. Because the areas where we are are not tourist areas. There are no tourists who are targets. The only Americans that go there are going there in these big yellow buses to help the people there. And it's -- the neighborhood -- the first one, particularly, that we were in is a gang-controlled area, and it -- you would think that would mean it could be very dangerous. But they know that if there's ever an attack on somebody who's going to help them, that that help will stop.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** It'll end. Yeah.

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** And so there's great protection in that because, I mean, Mark is indiscriminate. He will build houses for anybody who needs it and -- so sisters and mothers of gang members and probably gang members themselves. I mean, he is there to serve and we're there to serve people who have a great need.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** So -- I'm not sure who to take this question. But what kind of structures were you building? What is it that you were actually constructing?

>> **JUDGE MURPHY:** Well, as you can see in that picture there, it's a wood structure. It's 16 x 16, it's got one door, and it's going to have -- and it has one window. And there's space between, as you can see, from the roof and the -- I guess, the ceiling and the roof. There's a breezeway to allow air and ventilation to go through there. But that is the basics of the structure.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** And how long would it take you to build that structure?

>> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** Us? The skilled workers here?

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** The skilled labor force here.

>> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** Three to four hours.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** No. You're kidding?

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** Yeah.

>> **JUDGE MUNYON:** Yeah.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Three to four hours?

>> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** We're pretty good.

>> **JUDGE MURPHY:** The second day was --

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** That was -- the hardest part was done, because normally we would, like, take the wood into the site. And you should have seen -- I don't know if we -- we don't have other pictures. You should have seen the mountain -- I mean, it was not easy just to walk up there. It was probably a half-mile, maybe, even further up the mountain.

>> **JUDGE MUNYON:** Yeah. It was a long way.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** I'm telling you, if that wood hadn't been up there, we might be still building.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Okay.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** Just to get up to where the site was, we did have to carry the tools and the nails and all the buckets of all that stuff. I almost fell off the side of the hill at one point because it was so steep. I went up and turned the corner and I kind of lost my footing and almost rolled down. And it was rough. To get that wood up there would have just -- would have been crazy because it's fresh pine wood and it's heavy. I mean, the posts are really heavy. We had to move it for the second house. I can't even imagine getting it up that hill.

>> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** Well, let me tell an inside story about the second house. So between the first house and the second house, we were privileged to make 300 sandwiches and get fruit and cookies and water and go to the dump, for lack of a better word, where people who don't have a safety net go to collect items that people have thrown out and try to recycle them. And they almost live in the dump, and that's where they go for work. And so we were -- we had the opportunity to bring food to them one day.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Wow. Tell me a little bit about that. How is that organized; 300 sandwiches? Explain a little bit of the logistics of all that. Lisa?

>> **JUDGE MUNYON:** Well, we got up in the morning, we went with Mark to pick up the groceries, as it were, and we went back to their headquarters. And on benches, because there weren't any big tables, we made 300 sandwiches and put together these kits as a group. And then we carried them back to the bus and we took the bus to the dump.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Wow.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** We had, literally, big bags of bologna, and it was just, you know, all sliced in there.

>> **JUDGE MUNYON:** Yeah.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** And then cheese, which unfortunately was -- it still was wrapped, we had to undo it, and then everyone had a job. People laid out the bread, I was the meat guy.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** An assembly line?

>> **JUDGE MUNYON:** Yeah.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** I just went along and laid the meat on.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Fabulous.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** And then Jim from -- I guess he's from South Florida?

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** Jacksonville.

>> **JUDGE MUNYON:** Jacksonville.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** Jacksonville -- he's squirting mayonnaise on there, and then someone slapped the piece of cheese on and that was it. And we just put them all together and put them back in the bread bag so that when we went out to hand them out, we could just pull them right out.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** I'm going to go back a little bit to construction for a moment. What construction lesson did you learn building a house that you did not know before you started that project? Judge Murphy, let me start with you.

>> **JUDGE MURPHY:** Well, the -- twice I got the privilege, we'll call it, of working on the top of the roof, of a tin roof, and I felt like -- the second time, I felt like a piece of bacon just frying up there. And you definitely need to have, like, a CamelBak so you can be drinking water the entire time you're up there.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Okay. Gotcha.

What was yours?

>> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** Earplugs. You're hammering a nail for four hours nonstop. The banging is just deafening.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** No kidding. I wouldn't have thought of --

>> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** So bring earplugs.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Judge Munyon?

>> **JUDGE MUNYON:** I don't know that I learned anything I didn't know before, because I've done construction projects before.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Because your family is in construction, correct?

>> **JUDGE MUNYON:** Because my family is in construction. However, it reinforced that there is a very good reason to get a good education so that you don't end up spending your life doing this if you don't have to, because it's very hot, it's very dirty, very noisy, and it's very physically intensive. So you have to be pretty young to be able to do it for eight hours a day.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** And what I learned was, if I'm going to build a place like that, just go get a whole bunch of young Honduran boys. Because the way that they were banging nails in there -- I mean, some of these kids were little tiny kids; three whacks and that nail was in. And we're up there [indicating sound].

>> **JUDGE MUNYON:** Yeah, we're up there 20 times.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** You know, and they're just like, boom, boom, boom, and they had it in. So we had a lot of help.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** So, Alan, you're the old pro at this. What do you know about construction that you didn't know before you started these adventures?

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** Really, in terms of what we do to put them together, it's pretty simple, like these guys said. You're just banging nails, I mean, that kind of thing. I will



say that when I describe to someone who's never seen this, what we're building, they're like, well, is that really meaningful to somebody. Right?

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Um-hum.

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** And I wish you could have seen -- so in this first house, the family is here. The mom and five kids that were going to move into that, they were living in an equal size structure with eleven people --

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Oh, my goodness.

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** -- with parents and that kind of thing. Most of the people we build for either are coming out of something just like this, but they're just crammed in and have no individual space for their family; they're living -- multiple families together in something like that. But a lot of them are in the dirt in something smaller and even less secure. And it's a place where there is no kind of social safety net. There's no school lunch program. There's no welfare. There's no unemployment. There's no house. There's no anything. So these people are trying to figure out how to survive. And just to have, for a young mom and her kids, her own place to get kids out of the dirt, it is transformational.

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

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** Yeah.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Who owns that structure and the land?

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** So one of the things Mark does is make sure that where we build, we're building on land that the person can keep. And so, you know, he'll go --

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** So in our country, we would buy the land and then you'd own the land and you'd have title to the land and you'd pay for the -- you know, your residence.

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** Right.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** So is it similar or not similar?

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** It's sort of not similar in that land is pretty expensive because it hardly ever leaves families. Because that's what -- the only thing that people have, generally, is the land. So in this instance, like many places, this is right next to the house that this young woman -- young mother was in, and it's her family's land. So very --

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** I see. So very crowded house, next door now, a little more space.

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** Right. And now a little more space.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Yeah.

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** And we see that an awful lot.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** And what you can't see from the picture -- but I guess you kind of see, on this side, right behind where Alan is, it drops right off.

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** Yeah.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** And then there's another little bit of plateau, and that's where the other older house was with the eleven folks.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Gotcha. Gotcha.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** Right behind this, between the back of that structure and then where the rock wall in the back -- it was maybe three feet. You could just -- once the wall went up, you could barely walk behind there. And then it went straight up. So this was like -- it really is a very steep --

>> **JUDGE MUNYON:** It's on a mountain. Yeah.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** It's beautiful. I mean, if -- you know, some of the pictures, you could see of -- that I took of the view across the top, it's gorgeous. I mean, they have this beautiful place but, as you can see, it's rock and it's, you know, not developed at all.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Yeah. Yeah, it looks challenging.

What were your accommodations like? Where did you-all stay and what was that like?  
Judge Murphy, you want to start with that?

>> **JUDGE MURPHY:** We stayed in, I believe, it was a Clarion.

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** It was.

>> **JUDGE MURPHY:** And I don't think we ever had true hot water the entire trip.

But the --

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** So it must have been -- got to know each other fairly well, then, working out in the sun all day long.

>> **JUDGE MURPHY:** But the place was beautiful. And I guess because it's not a tourist trap, bottled waters there were like 60 cents apiece, coffee was like 60 cents. So from that perspective, it was fantastic. I had a hot tub in it, full restaurant.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Great.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** Swimming pool.

>> **JUDGE MUNYON:** It was beautiful.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** So how long were you-all there? Was it one week, is that what I -- was it one week?

>> **JUDGE MURPHY:** May 23<sup>rd</sup> through May 27<sup>th</sup>.

>> **JUDGE MUNYON:** Like five days, yeah.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** We got there Wednesday and left on Sunday.

>> **JUDGE MUNYON:** Yeah.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** How many structures did you build?

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** Two.

>> **JUDGE MUNYON:** Two.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Two.

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** And this is fun. So folks -- Mark gets this question -- Mark Connell, who is down there all the time -- how do you pick; I mean, you know, there are all these people with needs, how do you pick. And he was like, you know, you just try to follow your gut and figure it out. He got tired of the question so he told us that what we were going to do next is we were going to pick.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Oh.

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** And so there was one community that was very close to the dump. And in that community, they had put -- the community had put together a book with pictures and stories of the people in their community that needed homes. And so, you know, Mark gave us the book and said, okay, take a look, narrow it down, and then we'll go down in there and we'll drive in and you'll pick.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Wow.

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** And tell -- somebody, tell him what that was like.

>> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** Well, the litmus test of the house that we picked was how flat it was from where the wood was going to get dropped off to where we had to build. And so we chose a place as our first option that was the easiest to offload the truck and to start building that house.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Nobody said you guys aren't logical.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** But I will say that, you know, when Mark gave us the book and we started looking through that book, you -- the reaction of the people -- of the -- all of us looking at it was -- the reality was, we were actually -- you know, there was probably 50 families in there that needed a place.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Wow.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** That we were going to make a selection that meant the other people were not going to get one. So it was rough. It was not an easy decision.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Yeah. Yeah.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** But then when we drove -- we narrowed it down to three or four and we actually drove down and looked at them, and I think we made the right choice. It was a seventeen-year-old girl, I think it was, with a one -- not even a one-year-old, you know, baby who was living with her family. And so this hopefully would -- you know, was going to make a difference in her life; she can move into a place. But --

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Let me try something. We'll see if --

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** Let me just add that we narrowed it down to two, and afterwards -- we built the one that we built and Steve said, well, why don't we just collect the money and send it and have somebody else down there build the one for the one that we didn't pick. And so the day after we got back --

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Did you do that?

>> **JUDGE MURPHY:** Yeah.

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** -- Scott Westheimer, a lawyer from Tampa, said, I'll just go ahead and send the cash down and you reimburse me.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Wow. Fabulous.

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** And we all sent him money, and that house was built this summer, with one of the teams that went down, for the other person.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Let me try something. We'll see if it works. If it fails, I'll take responsibility. I'm going to kind of do a little bit of a rapid-fire one-word one-phrase answer to my questions. And we'll just go around the room.

Best part of the trip, Judge Munyon?

>> **JUDGE MUNYON:** Oh, yeah, you start with me.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** I start with you.

>> **JUDGE MUNYON:** Meeting the people.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Judge Murphy?

>> **JUDGE MURPHY:** The food was fantastic, in addition to meeting the people.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** All right. Judge Blechman?

>> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** The emotional experience.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Judge Jewett?

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** The fellowship of the people that we met. And then I agree, just the food was -- it was just -- it was fun.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Justice Lawson?

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** So I think the number one thing for me, every time I go, is that it increases my sense of gratitude for what we have in this country in a way that is lasting. And gratitude changes who you are, really. And so that lasting impact. But with this trip in particular, I can't tell you how long I've thought about how fun it would be to bring people from my professional world down there.

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

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** And these guys were fantastic. And it was such a fun group. I've never had a more fun trip. And I loved getting to know these guys better. And watching them experience something that I've experienced, it was so meaningful for me, was I think the number one thing, so -- yeah.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Great. That's great.

Justice of the Supreme Court -- I'm not going to call him on the one-word one-phrase answer, but that's okay.

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** I know.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Okay. Here we go. I'm going to go back to it.

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** I'll try to do better.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Hardest part of the trip? We'll start with you, Justice Lawson.

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** Hardest part of the trip; there was nothing hard about it for me.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** All right.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** Staying hydrated.

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** That's true.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** Yeah.

>> **JUDGE MUNYON:** Carrying things up the hill.

>> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** There was nothing hard about it.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** All right.

>> **JUDGE MURPHY:** The not -- the being concerned about the water, like water in the shower, making sure that there's potable water that you can drink.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** I was sure you were going to say, reading Judge Murphy's emails before I left. But --

>> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** You said, about the trip.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Yeah, about the trip.

>> **JUDGE MURPHY:** I replace emails with stories at some point too.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Would you do this again?

>> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** Tomorrow.

>> **JUDGE MURPHY:** Absolutely.

>> **JUDGE MUNYON:** Absolutely.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** Yes. And I think we are going to, aren't we?

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** Yeah, we're going to do it again.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Great. Great. Great.

What message would you give to someone who's hesitant to go on a trip like this? You know, just a little like, oh, I'm a little afraid of a foreign country and unknown experience. And maybe, like me, I have a pretty bad knee; I'm not sure I could get up the side of a mountain. What kind of advice do you give to people thinking about it?

>> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** There's nothing to fear. I never felt in harm's way. There was nothing that we did that we couldn't do. And if you weren't physically fit as much as somebody else, you were given a job or volunteered for a job that you could do. So whatever handicap you have that -- or you think you have, you shouldn't let it dissuade you.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** What question have I not asked that you want our public to know about this trip? I'm trying to cover it all. But what -- is there an area where you feel, I wish Judge Lauten would ask me this?



>> **JUDGE MUNYON:** Well, I can tell you that as much as you think the people get out of your service, I got so much more from them than I could ever give in building a little house like that.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Fabulous. Fabulous.

Well, I want to thank my colleagues for taking time out of their busy schedule. I know, because I come to this building every day to work, how dedicated the Judges who are with me today are as public servants. And I try to deliver that message whenever I can.

But I think one of the great things about this podcast is that I hope the public will understand that judges are human beings with human feelings and human sympathy, and understand that we, judges, don't just come to work and serve in our role, which is an honor to have, but really care about our fellow citizens. And I can't think of anything that represents that greater than the service that the five of you performed by going to help people in Honduras.

And so on behalf of all of the other Judges and everybody listening, thank you. You all are so impressive. And it's so impressive what you did. And I'm sure that you're well-thought of there, but I hope the public understands what fine human beings you are.

Thanks for joining us today.

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** Thank you.

>> **JUDGE MURPHY:** Thank you.

>> **JUDGE MUNYON:** Thank you.

>> **JUDGE BLECHMAN:** Thank you.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** One last thing, don't miss Carnitas restaurant, if you go.

>> **JUSTICE LAWSON:** That is correct.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** Carnitas; got to go there. Fantastic.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** All right. So the one thing I forgot to ask you about was the restaurants.

>> **JUDGE MUNYON:** Oh, man, the food was awesome.

>> **JUDGE JEWETT:** Yeah.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** All righty, guys, thank you very much. Appreciate your being with us today.

>> 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.

(Music)