

OPEN NINTH:

CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM

PROMOTING WELLNESS

FEATURING JUDGE LATIMORE AND JUDGE EGAN

EPISODE 152

HOSTED BY: LISA MUNYON

(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 Lisa Munyon.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Hello, and welcome to Open Ninth. I’m here today with Judges Alicia Latimore and Bob Egan to talk about the importance of wellness. Both of them serve on the Florida Judicial Wellness Program as well as our circuit’s wellness committee. And Judge Latimore actually started the statewide Florida Judicial Wellness Program for the Conference of Circuit Judges. They’re both committed to promoting better wellness practices here at the Ninth and in circuits across the state. I’m thrilled to have the two of you here today. Thanks for joining me.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Thanks for having us.

JUDGE EGAN: Thank you.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what is wellness? Tell me what it is.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Yes, well, wellness absolutely is a state of being and a state of mind. And it absolutely is necessary for us all, regardless of what profession we are in. But particularly those who are dealing with repeated stress and anxiety issues that could be job related or life related. It is necessary for us to take out the time to implement practices that are going to bring us to a point of calmness well-being, whether that be physically, mentally, emotionally and also health-wise.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So it’s more than just physical health.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Yes. Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And takes into account your spiritual, mental, emotional health as well.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Correct. And we pretty much are guided at the Florida Judicial Wellness Program with the eight dimensions of wellness, but if you look, there are several competing philosophies in regards to how many dimensions there are. But they incorporate spiritual, financial, occupational, health-wise, physical, also behavioral, emotionally and I believe there are others that Bob is counting on his fingers. We definitely want to make sure that we hit all areas that would impact wellness.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So why is wellness so important, especially in a profession like ours?

JUDGE EGAN: Well, I think wellness probably means different things to different people, to include judges. And judges I think because of our profession, we have a unique aspect that other professions don't and we see so much trauma involving others. And in fact that's something that we've recently had a wellness talk about was a concept called, Vicarious Trauma and how seeing so much pain and suffering in others can impact people in this position. It can be a mental health counselor. Certainly, as judges we see so many. If you've ever sat, and I know you have, in a criminal division, juvenile delinquency division, a child dependency division, you see some of the most horrific things. And you see them on a daily basis. So that's what drove me to get involved with this, is how the wellness of others, or the lack of wellness in others can impact us emotionally.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So tell me about the Florida Judicial Wellness Program.

What is it and how did it start?

JUDGE LATIMORE: The Florida Judicial Wellness Program actually started when the prior chair of the circuit judges' conference, Judge Scott Bernstein came up with the idea that he wanted a program that would offer support services and referrals to our judges throughout the state in regards to wellness and well-being. And that was after he personally and others had the experience of judges suffering from experiences on the bench and even one who died in regards to, as it relates to suicidal deaths of our judges as well. With that, he tapped me and asked me if I would be interested in helping to develop the program and I was absolutely interested. And I was able to pull together other judges around the state and we developed and implemented the program with the assistance of the Florida Lawyers Assistance, Inc. who offers the same services to lawyers around the state. So with that we are able to provide a toll free number as well as – we have a website and offer services to judges who might need some assistance with finding resources or finding help because they're having challenges and need some assistance with receiving treatment, receiving support, or even just educating them. We have a monthly online well talk to speak of wellness subjects and just to make sure that judges understand how this job and what we are dealing with on a day-to-day can in fact impact their well-being, and steps that they can take to take care of themselves, be preventive but also responsive to what's going on in their lives.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So the services that are offered to judges, are they anonymous? Can judges actually call and not worry about people knowing that they called to seek some advice or to seek services?

JUDGE LATIMORE: Yes, they can and in fact they're not required to identify themselves. If in fact they want someone to reach – call back or respond later on to their inquiry, then they may freely give a phone number, they can give a name, they can give a number, just some way to identify them if they need us to reach out later on. But they are not required to identify themselves and the program does not maintain any records of any contact received by judges, and any referrals that were made or information that was shared. So that information can – it remains confidential. It is not recorded. Additionally, we've had the benefit of our Florida Supreme Court recently modifying our Florida Bar rules to allow confidentiality to be extended over to judges and justices when voluntarily seeking treatment for chemical dependence and any type of mental health services. That previously was not in place. It only was extended to lawyers and now we also have the benefit of having that protection as well.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So tell me how did we get a program in the Ninth? You told us how the statewide program started, but how did the local program start and are we unique? Are we the only ones that have it?

JUDGE LATIMORE: So the Florida Judicial Wellness Program would typically provide in person activities on wellness to our judges at our annual conference in the summertime and that was a yearly event. But surely we need to be well all year around and don't need to wait for 365 days to go by before we speak about wellness and address those issues. So the goal is to make sure that we continue to talk about wellness and have wellness activities throughout the year. So the idea from the Florida Judicial Wellness Program was to have liaisons in each of the different circuits or jurisdictions that would be responsible for pulling together a local committee that would have local events and activities, and educational opportunities for their local judges throughout the year that would carry on until we were able to meet again as the full circuit at the

annual conference in the summer. The Florida Judicial Wellness Program of course tapped the Ninth Judicial Circuit to have its local wellness committee, and the Ninth Circuit took off with blazing guns, I mean, they really started and Judge Egan was really very instrumental in helping to get the Ninth wellness program up and running and having local activities for our judges and so we continue to be very engaged with that, with Bob's great ideas as to what we can do.

JUDGE EGAN: Well, I think we host the website now for the statewide and that's going very well also. But you know when I was – one of the reasons I like the wellness program and when I was growing up, people didn't talk about that. And statistically, you know, it takes – by the way, I think less than 50 percent of people who could use some professional help mentally or emotionally actually get it, and those who get it, it takes them over a decade to get up the courage to go do it. And when I was growing up, you know, these were things that were whispered, you know, she had a nervous breakdown and she's seeing a psychiatrist. You know, these weren't – these were whispered. And we're just trying our best to get it out in the open. It should not be a stigma. Mental health should be treated like physical health. And if you need a tweak here and there or a counselor, and from someone who's actually gotten some mental health counseling before, from things that bothered me since I was a child, it took me 45 years to do it. And once you do it, and you feel good about it, you're like, my goodness, why didn't I do this when I was 18 years old. And that's the kind of message I would like to be able to send. Get it off your chest, man, it's going to be okay.

JUDGE LATIMORE: I think what's really good about the wellness program, and particularly those who are very active and engaged in it, is that we have judges and there are some lawyers on our committees that assist as well and support our program. I think what's very important is that we're very transparent, just as Bob is transparent about his history, I've been

very transparent about the history. Even after being on the bench, being assigned to the criminal division and having repeated nightmares about someone stabbing me. Didn't have that before I got on the bench and had a moment in which I was dealing with that, and really not knowing where that came from, but learning later on about vicarious trauma and also other issues that can arise as a result of being repeatedly exposed to the types of cases that we might see. And I think when others find that you are transparent and you admit that you are not superman, and they feel comfortable in knowing that they are not the only one, they're more inclined to receive the messages that are being sent and then respond. We are not the only jurisdiction that has a local wellness committee. The Broward County, 17<sup>th</sup> Circuit is very active. In fact, Judge Tarlika Navarro who just recently joined the Ninth came from the 17<sup>th</sup> and she is very – was very active in that circuit when she was there and now is on our committee and very active with us as well. And there are other circuits around the state, Dade County, et cetera who have their local committees doing activities as well.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So Judge Egan, tell me, what are some of the things that are planned or have been done for judges here in the Ninth to support their wellness?

JUDGE EGAN: Well, starting from the easy, every courthouse we have, we know we have the two main ones here in Orange County, Osceola County. I think the outlying courthouses do have bulletin boards that have a variety of wellness messages. In Osceola County where I am now, we have an inspirational quote of the month which we reinstated just this past month, and I used to do that at juvenile court – the courthouse there before also. Again, before COVID-19 sort of shut things down for a while, we did regular yoga twice a month. We had a great following. We've just started that back up within the past month or so. Judge Blechman's wife is a yogi as she's an instructor, so she has been kind enough to donate her time.

And every other Wednesday we do yoga. And then we also do the 30 – for 30, is that ours or is that –

JUDGE LATIMORE: That is the 17<sup>th</sup> Circuit's but we are supportive of it and engaging the judges here locally to be active.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: What is 30?

JUDGE LATIMORE: 30 is doing – just making sure that we do activities to ensure that we are happy and that we are engaging a wellness for 30 days consecutively. And so we want to make sure we reflect just happy wellness and being for 30 days straight.

JUDGE EGAN: And you get an assignment a day and it's going to take you less than five minutes typically to do that, whether you're going to write something down that you're thankful for or you're just going to spend three minutes in silence doing your version of meditation, they just want to remind you to try to be well.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And what – I know other things are planned. You've got a wellness lunch coming up.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Correct, yes, we have what's called our collegiality luncheon where all the judges come together and we order or we bring food and because of the design of our courthouse and our busy schedules, we don't typically get to sit down and actually have an opportunity to have fellowship with each other on many occasions. So we have our Judge Barbara Leach who is responsible for our collegiality or hospitality committee and we have a collegiality luncheon every once in a while so now, we are incorporating a wellness spotlight or activity in our next collegiality luncheon so we want to combine the two because eating healthy is a wellness tip, right. And so since we are going to be eating together, we want to make sure



we not only eat well, have an opportunity to fellowship with others, which is a social dimension for our wellness, we also will be bringing a wellness tip with a judge's wife who is going to give us tips in regards to how we may deal with the aches and pains that come from sitting all day.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: I never knew how hard sitting was until you had to sit all day.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And couldn't litigate anymore.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Yes, most people would love to sit all day but they don't realize that that is not necessarily a good thing to sit all day.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: No, once they have to sit all day, they don't want to sit all day.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Exactly. Exactly.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So do you have any wellness tips for our audience? Judge Egan.

JUDGE LATIMORE: How much time do you have?

JUDGE EGAN: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: I'll take in all the tips you have.

JUDGE EGAN: Well, tip number one is to take care of yourself. I mean, we as judges, and we're not the only profession who takes on the problems of others, but we do see it every single day. Physicians would do that as well. But you have to take care of yourself first and I

think that's probably the single most important one. If I'm not mentally well, I don't know how I could sit and make decisions over some people who have some very traumatic things going on in their life. And one thing that struck me as a judge is how much or how prevalent mental health issues are out there and how many of the people we see, whether you've spent time in criminal court, the amount of people who have legitimate mental health diagnoses who might be getting in trouble because they're self-medicating themselves and that might involve illegal drugs. I've spent a lot of time in juvenile delinquency and you see the problems of mental health in children that can affect the parents mentally as well. And I think –

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Or vice-versa.

JUDGE EGAN: Exactly. Absolutely and I believe, this was true just a few years ago, the largest prescriber of psychotropic medications in Orange County is the Orange County Jail.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: I think it still is.

JUDGE EGAN: Okay. And so those are the things that impressed upon me is it's prevalent in society, and even if we don't always talk about it, we see it. Judges like you and Judge Latimore and I see it. We're a subset of society as judges. So you know, we also deal with mental health problems. So my biggest tip would be, if you're having a problem, please do something about it. Take care of yourself first. Talking to someone will always help. And as soon as you do, you're going to be thankful that you did it.

JUDGE LATIMORE: I also think it's important that we recognize that it's not that something's wrong with us, it's that something happened to us. We've had an experience, or we grew up in a certain environment. As part of wellness and understanding and learning wellness, I've learned a lot about trauma and the effects of trauma as well as adverse childhood

experiences. And we recognize the people who come through the court system often have experienced a high level of adverse childhood experiences which can lead to early involvement with the criminal justice system, or delinquency, or drug use, or early pregnancy, or mental health issues, all of those things. And so with that we have been able to look through our cases with a trauma lens and understanding that we really need to kind of address those matters of what happened and therefore be able to understand how it is that we address it and become well as a result of that. So I think people, one, should – one, take the time to understand and reflect back on what experiences they may have had and that gives them a better idea of what may be going on. But it also means that you can take the time to take care of yourself, to take a moment. We're all busy people. We often have our plates too full, from meetings, to job, to children, to spouse, to all the other responsibilities that we have in this life. And we often because of just our society and our culture do not take the time to make sure that we take a moment to refresh and regroup. And we really need to do that, whether it's a moment of meditation or breathing, learning how to breathe correctly or getting a good night's sleep or stepping away and going into nature. And those are some of the simple things that don't cost any money at all. You don't have to pay for a therapist all the time to be able to achieve wellness.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: All right. Well, thank you very much for joining me today.

JUDGE EGAN: Thank you.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: It's great to learn about wellness and to put the tips into practice.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Yes.

JUDGE EGAN: Thank you.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Thank you.

NARRATOR: Thank you for listening to ‘Open Ninth: Conversations Beyond the Courtroom’ brought to you by Chief Judge Lisa Munyon and the Ninth Judicial Circuit Court of Florida. Follow us on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram @ninthcircuitfl for updates on new episodes, and subscribe to Open Ninth on your favorite podcast service.

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