

OPEN NINTH:

CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM

JUDICIAL SPOTLIGHT:

MEET HONORABLE ALISON KERESTES

EPISODE 177

JUNE 9, 2023

HOSTED BY: CHIEF JUDGE LISA T. MUNYON

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 Judge Alison Kerestes, one of our newest circuit judges. Judge Kerestes is no stranger to the Ninth. After graduating from law school, she worked in the Office of the State Attorney here in our circuit for eight years. But in 2014, she decided to shift gears and start her own law firm, alongside her husband, Steve. She remained in private practice until last year when she successfully ran for election and returned to the Ninth as a circuit judge. I’m thrilled to have you in the studio today, Judge Kerestes. Thanks for joining me.

JUDGE KERESTES: Thanks for having me.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So tell me a little bit about yourself. Where did you grow up?

JUDGE KERESTES: Well, I grew up in Iowa until I was 11 years old. And then my family moved here. So I was actually born in Colorado, but I moved from Colorado to Iowa when I was three.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So you moved from Iowa to Florida when you were 11.

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: That had to be kind of a culture shock.

JUDGE KERESTES: It was a huge culture shock, but we were – I have three younger sisters and we were thrilled about it because all we knew about Florida was the beach and Disney World, and so we thought we were moving to our vacation.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what brought your parents from Iowa to Florida?

JUDGE KERESTES: Well, my dad at the time was a rehab counselor and they were opening a treatment center in the Ocala National Forest so they offered him the job to run the treatment center so we moved here to open it.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And did you live near Ocala or did you move to Orlando?

JUDGE KERESTES: I moved to Ocala so I lived there until I went to college.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Ocala is a beautiful place.

JUDGE KERESTES: It is. It is. The horse farms are beautiful.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And do your parents still live there?

JUDGE KERESTES: They do, yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So they're close by which is awesome.

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes, it is.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So once you got to Orlando, did your life change from being in Iowa?

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes. It changed a lot. When I lived in Iowa, I lived in two different towns. The first one only had 1500 people and then we moved to a town with about 15,000 people. That was Newton, Iowa which is the home of Maytag.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Oh.

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes, and then we moved to Ocala and it was very different. We didn't have a mall in either of our towns in Iowa. The first one only had three restaurants and no stop lights so it was a lot more people and a lot more diversity.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, did you get involved in things in school once you moved down to Florida, any extracurricular activities?

JUDGE KERESTES: I did. I have loved swimming since I was a little girl but in Iowa it's cold a lot and there's not a lot of pools. So when I moved here, I joined a swim team almost immediately and I started swimming year-round so that was pretty much my life through all of middle and high school.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So did you swim competitively?

JUDGE KERESTES: I did. I did. And I actually set a record at high school.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Oh really. For what?

JUDGE KERESTES: In the 500 Freestyle. I was a distance swimmer so I set the school record there.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Oh, well, that's awesome.

JUDGE KERESTES: Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So did you continue swimming after you finished high school?

JUDGE KERESTES: I did not. I didn't swim in college. Sometimes I wish I did. But I went to USF in Tampa and I unfortunately stopped swimming.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So you moved from Ocala to Tampa to go to USF. What did you study?

JUDGE KERESTES: Psychology.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Psychology. That's – did you have any idea that you wanted to go to law school when you studied psychology?

JUDGE KERESTES: No, none.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Because it's a great major.

JUDGE KERESTES: It is. I found it very helpful especially at the State Attorney's Office.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what did you do after – you majored in psychology. I assume you got your degree –

JUDGE KERESTES: I did.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: -- in psychology.

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: What did you do after graduating with a degree in psychology?

JUDGE KERESTES: Well, I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do and I worked at Circuit City all through undergrad and so I went into customer service management there and I looked into some – going into human resources there.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And for those who don't know what Circuit City is, that's the predecessor to Best Buy.

JUDGE KERESTES: Yeah, basically. So I was in management there for a few years after college and debating whether or not to go back to grad school or what to do. And actually later on in my years of undergrad I volunteered on a suicide hotline. And I decided psychology wasn't for me.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Oh. Well, that's quite an undertaking volunteering at a suicide hotline.

JUDGE KERESTES: It was. It was. It was a lot and so I felt that I really wanted to be more active. I wanted to help people solve their problems but I wasn't sure that I was meant to just help them talk about it. I wanted to take a more active role so I decided not to go to grad school and ended up in law school.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And where did you go to law school?

JUDGE KERESTES: Florida State.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And was law school what you expected it to be?

JUDGE KERESTES: No, not at all.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Oh really. What was different about it than what you expected?

JUDGE KERESTES: Well, I guess I should have expected this but I was not familiar that they taught law school by the Socratic method and I was a very shy kid. So the amount of talking I had to do in class was very surprising for me. I didn't expect that.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Yes, if you don't expect it, it can be a bit daunting, can't it?

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes, definitely.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: But if you're going to be a trial lawyer, it's helpful.

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes. And honestly, I did not have great study skills to law school either. For most of undergrad I could get good grades without having to study a lot so having to study so much in law school was a huge change too.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So you went to Florida State. You obviously graduated and became a lawyer.

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: What was your first job?

JUDGE KERESTES: It was at the State Attorney's Office.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Here in Orlando?

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what brought you here to the State Attorney's Office?

JUDGE KERESTES: Well, in 2006 Bill Vose came and conducted interviews at Florida State and he invited me to come and take a tour of the office. And I did that, and I really enjoyed it. I really liked the State Attorney's Office. I liked Orlando because it was close to home without

being too close to home. And it just seemed like a great fit for me so right after law school, I moved here to Orlando.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: How long did you stay at the State Attorney's Office?

JUDGE KERESTES: Eight years.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So tell me a little bit about being a prosecutor? What was it like?

JUDGE KERESTES: It was very challenging. And it was very rewarding. While I was at the State Attorney's Office, I handled just about everything except homicide cases so I was in the domestic violence unit. I handled felonies. I was in juvenile for almost two years of the time I was there and I was in sex crimes. And so there were a lot of challenges and a lot of exposure to people different than I was. I really enjoyed feeling helpful and feeling like I was doing good. And it was just a great job. It was a great experience for me.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: I know when I was there, which was many years before you, it was a great team. There was a lot of camaraderie among the prosecutors and you could sit down and just talk with a colleague about your case.

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes, that part was amazing, especially in sex crimes. I had a great supervisor and we had round tables every Friday where we sat and went over our cases. And it was just such a great team. We still look back fondly on those times.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what made you decide to leave the State Attorney's Office?



JUDGE KERESTES: I wanted a new kitchen and I could not afford it. My husband also worked at the State Attorney's Office so we were not making a ton of money even though we had great jobs. And so I decided to leave for private practice so I could have a new kitchen.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, that's a very practical reason to leave. Absolutely.

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And what did you do when you went into private practice?

JUDGE KERESTES: I originally went to a foreclosure firm and did that for a few months. And then I went to a different foreclosure firm where I met another attorney who wanted to go out on her own. And I had a lot more experience than she did and she really liked that. So she recruited me to start a law firm with her and we opened our own firm.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Wow, that's a bit scary.

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes, it was very scary.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: But you never regretted that decision, I don't imagine.

JUDGE KERESTES: No, I didn't. I'm really happy I did it and I was really grateful to her for pushing me to do it because I might not have done it otherwise.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And did your husband eventually join you at that firm?

JUDGE KERESTES: He did. About a year and a half into opening that firm, the partner that I had and I realized that the kind of cases we handled were going in two different directions. She did a lot of bankruptcy. I did a lot of criminal defense. And so we both thought it best to part and my husband was still at the state. That's where I met him. And he was ready to leave and he

actually worked somewhere else for a few months but then he came and joined me because I had too much work to do which is a great problem to have.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Wow, that is a great problem to have.

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes, so he came and joined me at Kerestes Law Firm. And we worked together for several years.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: All right. How long did you have the Kerestes Law Firm before you decided to run for judge or before you took the bench? That might be an easier –

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes. About seven years.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what made you decide to run for judge?

JUDGE KERESTES: Well, a lot of things really. You know as an attorney my practice always took me to court every single day and especially in private practice, I went all over Central Florida. So I would see a lot of judges and think I would do things this way, or I would – you know, I might try this or I really like what that judge does. And I kept thinking if – I can do this, you know I think I can run an efficient docket. I know I've got a good demeanor for it. I am slow to anger. I'm a good listener. And so I just thought I'm just going to go for it. I'm just going to try it. And if it doesn't work out, if I don't win, then I still have this great law firm with my husband. So life will be great either way.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So how long did you run for judge?

JUDGE KERESTES: A long time.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: It might have seemed like forever, but –

JUDGE KERESTES: It feels like my whole life. I filed about a year and a half early so I ran for a year and a half.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: That's a long time.

JUDGE KERESTES: It is. It's a long time to be a candidate because once you're a candidate you're always a candidate, every minute of the day.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And it's a lot of work to run an election.

JUDGE KERESTES: It is. It was a second full time job for sure.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So did you find – I know it's daunting running an election but did you find rewarding parts of it?

JUDGE KERESTES: I did. I found many rewarding parts. It took me to places I never would have gone to otherwise. I met so many great people. And it got me out of the legal community and back into just you know Orange and Osceola County, meeting regular people and hearing their opinions. Learning you know what they knew and didn't know about the court system. It's a great opportunity to educate people about that so I found a lot of it really rewarding. I was really happy I did it.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And tell me how you felt when you finally were able to say okay, I think I've won?

JUDGE KERESTES: I was shocked honestly. I was, you know, you get so beat down by the end of the campaign. It's just so much work. You're doing it seven days a week, ten, twelve hours a day.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Oh, and at that time of year it's hot too.

JUDGE KERESTES: It's very hot. Very hot. So – and my husband and I actually decided to go on a two-week trip right after the election and we had already started driving when I found out.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Oh really, wow.

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes. So a friend of mine that worked on the campaign called us while we were on the road and we had to pull over at a rest stop so that we could –

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Do a happy dance.

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes. Yes. And so it was a great – it was a great surprise. My vacation was a lot better because of it. I was really happy but it was really hard to stop campaigning because I had been doing it so long. It was hard to set it aside.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: It probably almost became a lifestyle.

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes, it definitely did.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And you won at the primary, so in August.

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So you have over three months before you take the bench.

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: While you're you know winding down your practice and thinking about things. Seems like a really long time.

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes, it felt like a really long time. It was the longest few months of my life.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Yeah, because you have to keep working on your cases but you really don't want to take on new cases because you may not be able to finish them.

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes. Yes, well, and it was really helpful for my husband to be with me because of that. He took over a lot of the cases so it was really more transitioning everything to him and then I was helping him while I was waiting.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So I know your husband was thrilled as well that you had won.

JUDGE KERESTES: Well, he was. He was definitely thrilled and happy for me but I ran the law firm and so he was dreading having to do that part. And he's actually going to go back to the State Attorney's Office.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Is he?

JUDGE KERESTES: He is, yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Oh, well, that's exciting.

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes. I'm very excited. I love that we're both going to be back in public service again.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Yeah. So you took the bench in January.

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And you went immediately to the domestic violence division.

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So how is being a judge different than what you thought it would be?

JUDGE KERESTES: Well, it really is a third perspective that's very different. When I switched from being a prosecutor to a defense attorney and you started looking at cases from that different perspective and talking to criminal defendants, it was – it was a real eye-opening experience, and I'm having that again to see what it looks like, to see the parties and the attorneys down in front of you. It's a huge change.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Are there things that you didn't expect?

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes. One thing is people tell you a lot more than you need to know which is fascinating. You almost want to tell them, okay, I have enough information now but I try to keep letting them talk so that was interesting. I really thought I would want more information than I actually need.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Sometimes participants want to tell you things that aren't relevant to your decision.

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes. Yes, and it seems clear to me what is relevant but I know when I was an attorney that it wasn't as clear to me what the judge would find relevant.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: I can tell you – I like you I was a litigator and I did – I was a prosecutor, and then a criminal defense attorney largely. And I was in court everyday and I thought I knew what being a judge was like. However, I can tell you I had no appreciation for how much – I assumed if judges weren't on the bench, that they didn't have anything to do.

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Yeah, and that's really wrong.

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Did you find that to be the case too?

JUDGE KERESTES: I did. I did. I did, and in relation to the cases, and we're also asked to do a lot of things that I really want to do but it almost feels like I'm campaigning again sometimes trying to go to events and being out in the public.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Yeah, that's something I think a lot of people don't recognize is that in addition to our day job, which is adjudicating our caseload and going through all the mail and doing everything else that we have to do and preparing for the next day, there are all of these I call them kind of extracurricular activities that you're expected to go to. Bar functions, voluntary bar functions, just getting out you know and making sure that you're staying in touch with the community.

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: It can be a second full time job.

JUDGE KERESTES: It can. And I'm glad that I ran for election because of that, because I know how important that is and how much it's needed in the community to know more about what we're doing.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So has there been any – is there any advice that you would have for lawyers that want to eventually become a judge?

JUDGE KERESTES: Plan and start early, not even just with starting your campaign but if you think you want to be a judge, I think you should definitely consider what it takes and what

would be good to help you get elected, or if you decide to go the appointment route. And start working on that early. I started kind of late and I think it would have been a lot easier for me if I had started early.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Is there any advice – you know we have some new judges coming on the bench that will be even newer than you.

JUDGE KERESTES: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So is there any advice that you would give them about being a new judge and becoming – doing your job well?

JUDGE KERESTES: Don't be afraid to ask questions and something Heather Pinder Rodriguez told me is always bring your patience to court.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: That is a very – that's very good advice. Well, thank you so much for joining me, Judge Kerestes. It's been awesome getting to know a little bit about you.

JUDGE KERESTES: Thank you. Appreciate it.

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