

OPEN NINTH

CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM

TAKING A PAWS

DOGS, CATS, AND COVID-19

FEATURING DR. KIMBERLY LEE

EPISODE 113

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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. A few weeks ago Dino Ferri, the CEO of the Central Florida Zoo joined me on our talk show to just share a little bit about COVID-19 and its impact on animals. And that conversation got me thinking about how and where our lives and the lives of our animals intersect. While we all love the animals at the zoo, and Tiger King was the number 1 distraction at the start of this pandemic, I think it’s a safe bet that not many of us having daily interactions with big cats. But when we start talking about our domestic companions, that’s a completely different story. With me today to talk about the impact of COVID-19 on our favorite feline and canine companions, and how our relationships with our beloved pets helps us navigate this pandemic, is Dr. Kimberly Lee, a veterinarian at the Animal Medical Clinic of Orlando. Dr. Lee, thanks for joining me.

DR. LEE: Thank you for having me.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: I’m really excited to be able to engage in this conversation as a pet lover, pet owner –

DR. LEE: Okay.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: I have a chocolate lab at home –

DR. LEE: Nice.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: -- who's just turned nine for us, an amazing animal and so much a part of our family. I'm really interested in your experiences and some of the thoughts that you may have that might help us. So thanks for being here.

DR. LEE: Sure, thank you.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So tell us a little bit about how you became a vet. You're from this area locally, right?

DR. LEE: For the most part. I moved here when I was thirteen from New York and so I went to Dr. Phillips High School and went to the University of Florida for undergrad and veterinarian school. And I've been practicing about nineteen years at the Animal Clinic of Orlando which is kind of near downtown and I absolutely love it. Just the greatest clients in the world, great doctors there and staff so it's been wonderful.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So did you walk that path directly out of high school, right into undergrad, right into your doctorate, and then right into practice?

DR. LEE: Yeah, it's just been a dream of mine and I just followed my dream since I was a child. I definitely had some moments where I wasn't sure, but overall there's nowhere else I'd rather be than to be a veterinarian.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: That's great. So you've lived in our local community as a veterinarian for some time now. Tell us a little bit about your connections here in the community, to people and to their pets.

DR. LEE: Oh boy, well, you know, this time especially, you know, I find that being a veterinarian is more about people sometimes than even animals. You know, I have such great

connections with the people who bring their pets to me. And since I've worked there for so long, I've met these pets as puppies and kittens and then unfortunately, I've gone through the whole process where, you know, I've seen their whole entire life and then at the end I have to say good-bye. That's been absolutely amazing and it's amazing to meet those people that own those pets and get to have those relationships with them.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So you have a bit of a specialization in your practice as well, is that right?

DR. LEE: I don't know.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Do you – I know that you've talked about this idea of being with owners and pets through their life cycles. Do you focus on geriatric pets, older pets, or –

DR. LEE: I do like geriatrics a lot. And I like to talk about hospice and quality of life with people. I like to guide people through that time because that's the hardest time is to have a older pet and have to make some hard and tough decisions. And I don't know, I've done it many times with my own pets. My pets are my world and so it's just easy for me to communicate with them about being a senior and about what to do when we have to say good-bye and how to say good-bye. So I do like to focus on that. I mean, that's the hardest part of my job but I do find that I'm able to do it well as far as being able to communicate with people for that.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Sure. So I want to talk with you a little bit about this pandemic that we're in and animals contracting the virus. As I shared with you before we began our conversation, we had the chance to speak with Dino Ferri who is the CEO of the Central Florida Zoo about the impact of the virus and the things that they've done at their local zoo level to try to protect the animals and to protect people while visiting the zoo there.

DR. LEE: Sure.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: We had a little bit of conversation and touched it on this idea of reverse zoonotic diseases, not only the zoonotic being transmitted from the animal to humans, but also now from humans to animals, the reverse part of that. And I guess COVID-19 has now been identified as one of those reverse zoonotic diseases.

DR. LEE: Um-hum, yes. So you know, I think cats are more susceptible. They have mentioned minks, which -- that's not in my wheelhouse, but you know mink farms are having issues with COVID. There has been a few dogs that had virus detected when swabbed. Most of those households for dogs and cats have been households that had a family that had COVID, so an entire family with COVID, and then they would go in and just swab pets more for research purposes. There has not been many true cat cases or dog cases of COVID, although you might read that there was a pet that may have passed away who potentially had COVID. There's still question whether that truly was COVID. And even there was a patient in North Carolina, for instance, a pug that didn't eat for one day and had COVID isolated in his nasal swabs, but his entire family had COVID and the pet was absolutely fine. So I think that we can potentially give our pets COVID. That's certainly a possibility, but I don't think that it's anything that we need to worry about. I don't think it's anything like if we don't have COVID, especially, we don't need to worry if our cats or dogs are exhibiting upper respiratory symptoms, most likely it's some other type of symptom, not from COVID. So if you don't have COVID, and your pet is coughing and sneezing and everything else, your pet does not have COVID. And if we do have COVID, you know the thought is, is that we should try to stay away from our pets while we are sick just in case, you know, we don't potentially want to give it to them. That being said, when you look at how many people have COVID, we really are just not seeing the pet population having an issue.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Exactly. So if I'm somebody who has contracted COVID, maybe my entire family has contracted it, we have pets in the home, we can't distance ourselves from them, can't separate, what am I looking for symptom-wise, and how would you diagnose them?

DR. LEE: Well, we do offer swabs, you know, that can be sent to a state lab. I have not done that personally. My personal recommendation is if you have COVID and your pet is having mild, what you feel is COVID symptoms, the last thing we want to do is really bring it to the animal hospital unless you feel like it's dying because that's just not a good idea. If you feel like it's dying, then certainly give us a call, let us know and we'll figure out what we need to do, call our state diagnostic lab, but I have not had that issue. I definitely had clients who had COVID and I've had people call me about their pets, but we have not had any issues. I think some people are sensitive to their pet when they're sick as well. Like we had, you know, some people were sick and they were worried their pet, you know, missed a meal and you know, on the phone we kind of just said, you know, most likely you're kind of micromanaging your pet at this moment, you know, step back, you're probably going to be okay, your pet's probably going to be okay, you know, and nothing has come out of that.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Yeah, so it's not a significant problem certainly in our community and really not across the country, you're not hearing about a –

DR. LEE: No.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: -- pervasive number of cases or problems?

DR. LEE: Yeah, I mean, the good news is I'm in tune with a veterinarian forum where I get all the information about COVID especially throughout the country and throughout the world. And I have not seen anything that alarms me as far as COVID.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: That's good to hear.

DR. LEE: Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And so nevertheless, here we are in this pandemic and while not all of us have contracted it and nobody seems to have spread it to their pets, we are at home in close contact with our pets, working from home. How does that benefit our animals?

DR. LEE: Well, I think a lot of our dogs are enjoying it. You know, they're going on a lot more walks, they're getting a lot more attention. They're getting a lot more snacks. I've seen definitely an increase in obesity because people are also trying to feed their pet while they're doing their zooms and they're like, you know, stop barking, stop moving, you know, and they just give them treats and so I've seen those issues. I've seen dogs that went on too many walks, you know, they had worn pads, worn nails. I've seen people call me because their pets sleep all day and they think something's wrong with their pet and I'm like, I'm pretty sure your pet was sleeping when you were working, you just weren't aware of it. And definitely, you know, some people can't really be with humans right now, especially if they're immunocompromised or what have you, and so their pets are becoming this amazing thing to them where they feel safe to be with their pet but they can't be with their loved ones and – and that's amazing and great, but you know, when we do go back on the work – into the working world, you know, that's when things will be challenging for our pets.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: I think – and I haven't been home that much, but my wife has been working from home and she describes some of our lab's behaviors and our lab is food motivated and extremely, extremely friendly, just loves people, loves attention, loves the petting, everything. And she said that it seems to have increased, that her desire to be around people has even increased more because she's around all the time. Never gets satiated.

DR. LEE: Yes, and I think that – I do see a lot of separation anxiety in pets in general. And before COVID we actually prescribed a lot of anti-anxiety medications and then during COVID, some people called and said, I don't – my pet doesn't need those medications anymore, how do I wean them off. And so these animals are not on their normal medications, and the only concern I have is when we go back to the real world, you know how are we going to transition these pets. And that can be challenging, you know, because they're definitely going to see an increase in separation anxiety once we start really working.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Right, and so do two things for me. Tell me about separation anxiety and then tell me what do I do as a practical matter if I start to see that in my dog at home.

DR. LEE: Well, a lot of these pets, I mean, once you start either getting ready for work or getting ready to leave, they start pacing and panting, vocalizing. Some of them actually do destructive behavior when you're gone. I mean, I have seen some amazing things as far as tearing up the house, tearing up floorboards, doorways, pillows and just really like losing their mind because their owners are not there. So a lot of these pets, you know, now that we're home a lot, if we start to transition to work, what we probably really need to do is start to get into a regular schedule before we even start working where we leave the house more frequently and, you know, maybe give positive reinforcements when we leave. They do offer these kong toys that you can actually fill up with chicken broth, for instance, and freeze it in your freezer, and just offer it as a



special treat when you leave to kind of, you know, distract the dog while you're going, just something very positive and we definitely need to like start leaving the house more often before we actually go to these 8-hour work days right away.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Awesome. So in response to the COVID and the pandemic, has there been any change in the level of pet adoptions?

DR. LEE: For sure. For sure. If you talk to Pet Alliance, which I've talked to them briefly, they had such an increase in adoptions which was amazing and fostering. A lot of the fostering became adoptions. I can't remember what the numbers were but they almost adopted out, I heard about 80 percent of their group of dogs and cats during the stay-at-home orders and I talked to them recently and they still have a really good adoption rate going on right now. They have not personally seen a lot of relinquishments yet. They are worried about, you know, when we start to have future potential evictions, what that will be like. They also did have a food bank during a lot of the stay-at-home, and they did some stuff with Meals on Wheels as well which is pretty amazing. That being said, even at my work we had three cats at our doorstep within one week with notes saying that these people could not take care of them. And I'm sure, you know, other areas are hit worse than others so there's definitely going to be people that cannot take care of their pets properly. And I'm sure we're going to see that, especially as the economy changes.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Yeah, it is certainly anticipated that this could be a very difficult economic time as we move out of the pandemic as the moratoriums on evictions and foreclosures are lifted and folks are having to face very directly a lot of the financial challenges that perhaps they had been protected from during the pandemic itself. And I think that's an interesting thing to keep an eye on. I do know people who have adopted during this time though. Much of it is a response to their own frustration, depression, that the struggle that they have with the way that

things are, the absence of human contact during our stay-at-home orders and are socially distancing, those types of things. So I guess it doesn't surprise me to see that uptick in the adoptions.

DR. LEE: Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, as we kind of wrap things up, can you tell us just from your perspective some of the benefits of pet ownership and helping owners to navigate COVID-19, both physically and mentally?

DR. LEE: Well, I mean, my pets bring me such joy. It's hard for me to not – I don't know. It was kind of a joy that I had before COVID and obviously during COVID, I mean, I've enjoyed them even more. I mean, you know, they're so extra special to people who own pets. But if you've never owned a pet before and especially if you're experiencing such loneliness, you know sometimes cats especially, people say, oh, I don't like cats, I don't like cats. Well, you never know until you own a cat. Like you really have to own a cat to understand a cat. And cats can be amazing pets. But you have to kind of open your heart to them. And if you do that, I think you're just going to find, you know, just a better life in general once you have pets. And especially with this COVID situation, a lot of people feel like they can't control anything in the world, but for some reason they can control their pets in a positive way and that's been a great thing too, you know.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Yeah. That's excellent. Well, you know as a pet owner, who enjoys that joy that we get from our dog, I know that – I certainly encourage pet ownership among those that are responsible and able to afford them. Pets are not inexpensive.

DR. LEE: Oh, for sure.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And my veterinarian could share that with you. But it is absolutely a beneficial thing. Well, Dr. Lee, I just want to thank you for joining us today to share those insights for us about how pets and the COVID-19 virus in our homes are interacting and we just appreciate you so much being here. Thank you.

DR. LEE: Yes, this has been a great joy. Thank you for asking me to be on.

NARRATOR: You've been listening to "Open Ninth: Conversations Beyond the Courtroom" brought to you by Chief Judge Donald A. Myers, Jr. 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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