

OPEN NINTH:

CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM

TRAUMA INFORMED COURTS

FEATURING ALICIA L. LATIMORE AND DR. KIMBERLY RENK

EPISODE 178

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HOSTED BY: JUDGE ALICE L. BLACKWELL

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 guest host, the Honorable Alice Blackwell.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: Hello, and welcome to Open Ninth. I’m your guest host, Judge Alice Blackwell. And I’m here today with Judge Alicia Latimore, our administrative judge for the unified problem-solving courts and Dr. Kimberly Renk, a professor of psychology at the University of Central Florida. Over the years Dr. Renk has dedicated much of her time and experience to understanding the effects of trauma-informed services on families and children. And as a part of her professional work, she’s partnered with many local organizations, like our circuit, to educate others on the importance of those services. Judge Latimore served as a circuit judge here in the Ninth since she first joined the bench in 2006. She became the administrative judge for our circuit’s unified problem-solving courts in 2021 and she presides over the early childhood court, our mental health court, our veteran’s treatment court and our drug courts, all of which are trauma-informed courts. She’s also served in our domestic violence court, another trauma-informed court in our Ninth Circuit. Today we’ve invited these two wonderful people into the studio to talk about the need to trauma-informed courts and how our problem-solving courts aim to reduce the effects for trauma on those that come into our Ninth Circuit Courts. And thank you both for joining me.

JUDGE LATIMORE: You’re welcome.

DR. RENK: Thank you. Good morning.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: Good morning. All right, so we want to talk about trauma and how people that come into the courts bring trauma with them and how they might experience

trauma just by walking through our doors. But before we do that, Dr. Renk, we sort of want to find out something about you. What was your – what brought you into the study of trauma? What in your sort of background, in terms of your education or your – maybe your practice, your professional life caused you to be interested in trauma?

DR. RENK: Well, I'm trained generally as a psychologist but my first contact with children who had experienced a lot of trauma was when I was completing my master's work at Illinois State University. That was my first contact with the child welfare system in Illinois and so that gave me a good taste. But then when I went on and did my doctoral work, freely a pivotal experience for me was working at Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center with Dr. Joy Osofsky and that was my first step into what we called Infant Team in New Orleans, which is similar to early childhood court that we have here in Florida.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: What did you see when you were working on the Infant Team?

DR. RENK: Well, you know, it was interesting to me up until that point, I had had a lot of contact with older children and adolescents, but to see things downscale into families that had very young children, infants and littles who had been impacted by events that had occurred in their families made me realize that even our youngest citizens really can be impacted by negative things happening in families. And so once I got to that venue, I was like okay, I pretty much know what I want to do for the whole rest of my life and have been on that path ever since.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: It's amazing how seeing what happens to little, teeny tiny babies can have such a major impact on them when you don't think that it could.

DR. RENK: Yeah, you know, in fact some of my colleagues, they're all about well, what do you do once you have babies with you? Like their mindset is if you don't remember, oh,

they'll never remember. You know, that's not going to be a thing, but it truly impacts even our infants who come through families who have really difficult things happening. And I think we definitely see that in early childhood court.

JUDGE BLACKWEL: Okay, and so let's work on what – and we'll get back to that, Judge Latimore. I can see you're dying already. But let's get a working definition of trauma on the table because people sort of feel like okay, we all say, oh, that was traumatic to me. But let's get a working definition of trauma so we all know what we're talking about. How do we define trauma from a clinical standpoint? As a clinician, how do we define trauma, Dr. Renk?

DR. RENK: Well, I think historically trauma was always viewed in the context of war, right, so our earliest references to trauma are things like shell shock, combat fatigue where people thought that the events had to be out of the ordinary events that put you in jeopardy or could cause death or great harm. But I think it was much more recently that we started to extend those definitions to other instances. So domestic violence, abuse in families, difficult experiences in society, and so now we know that trauma can be defined much more broadly. But I know when I look at trauma as a clinician, I'm always looking for events that put somebody at risk and make them feel like harm could come to them or to somebody that they love. And those may not be what people consider typical circumstances in everyday life but I think for some of our families, especially those who are in the child welfare system, who come through the court system, who come through early childhood court, that's kind of a common occurrence for them unfortunately.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: So if we're trying to put together a definition of trauma, a working definition, we're talking about something that makes someone feel unsafe?

DR. RENK: Unsafe. Their life is at risk. They could be harmed. Someone they love could be harmed and they could be witnessing that. Events that cause them great fear or to be very scared or that are very unpredictable where you don't know what the outcome is going to be. And so whenever there is something atypical happening or something with extraordinary feeling happening, or somebody is in danger, I think that can cause some of the subsequent changes that we see in emotional and behavioral functioning.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: And I guess that's why little babies can experience that because they need, when they cry, to know that somebody is going to pick them up and comfort them.

DR. RENK: Yes, I agree.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: And if that doesn't happen then they're having a traumatic event, is that what happens to them?

DR. RENK: Yeah, you know, it's interesting because when talk about babies, they certainly don't have verbal recollection that they can share but I think trauma gets stored in our bodies in really interesting ways where we can recall sounds or smells or different visuals where if you have a repeat occurrence of that, you can see even a very young child startle as a result. So for example, just the other day I had a mom who was reprimanding a child and that mom came forward toward the child and had the toy that the child had been swinging at a sibling in the air. And the child kind of cowered and winced and I thought, oh, okay, this has happened before, but not in a constructive way like it's happening now. But the child still had a lot of uncertainty about what the outcome of that was going to be like. They were anticipating a hit of one kind or another, just based on their response. And when that didn't happen, they were kind of like, huh, well, that's interesting. Like you could see that wash over their face.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: But they already had that stored response –

DR. RENK: Right.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: -- in their body from what had happened before.

DR. RENK: Exactly.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: Incredible. Okay. So Judge Latimore, you've been at the forefront of baby court in our state and you've been a teacher about trauma to judges all over this state. So tell us about baby court. What does it do? How can you effect a change for these little bitty infants and what does baby court do? What is it?

JUDGE LATIMORE: So baby court is one of our problem-solving courts for the dependency division for children who are in the child welfare system, removed from their parents for abuse, abandonment, or neglect. And the main intervention that we offer in our early childhood court program with children who are between the ages of 0 and 5, is that we allow them and their parents to participate in child-parent psychotherapy and we are blessed to have Dr. Renk as our leading child-parent psychotherapist for many of the families that are involved in the early childhood court program here in the Ninth Judicial Circuit. And so with that psychotherapy and that intervention, we have an opportunity to provide early access and early treatment for the trauma that the children have experienced as you've been speaking with Dr. Renk about in order to effectively ensure that we may be able to capture whatever might prevent their regular brain development as well as adverse childhood experiences and what the long-term effect might be on having that experience as well as allowing their parents to participate in child-parent psychotherapy to deal with some of the trauma that they've had in their lives that led them to become parents that would have children removed from their custody. So we are a non-

adversarial multidisciplinary team, a team of staff, personnel, a team of therapists, a team of other members or providers in the community who can offer services to our families, along with the court so that we can assure that once these children, if they are able to be returned to their parents, they have one, been able to deal with the trauma that was involved in their little lives as well as we've had an opportunity to address the trauma of their parents. So that will reduce the likelihood that they may be coming back to the child welfare system at a later date by being abused again or even having siblings have that unfortunate experience.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: Okay, and that's a trauma-informed court?

JUDGE LATIMORE: It is a trauma-informed court. With trauma-informed court, that means that all of the personnel, including the judge, and those who are providers to the families, have had trauma training. And so we've gone through education. We've gone through webinars, training in person, all types of opportunities in order for us to understand trauma. A lot of it has been taught to us by Dr. Renk. And so we take advantage of her as often as we can to learn as much as we can to be trauma-informed as well as trauma-responsive so that we don't – we don't commit or cause more trauma because now they're in the justice system. We want to make sure that we're not causing more harm. We're here to in fact help them to heal as opposed to causing additional trauma to the family.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: So Dr. Renk, one question about babies since we're talking about baby court now. Does it make a difference how long a person has between the traumatic event and when it's dealt with?

DR. RENK: Absolutely.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: Why?

DR. RENK: Well, you know all of the trauma-informed interventions that we use like child-parent psychotherapy really focuses on remediating that trauma. And so we talk about speaking the unspeakable and that means that you can bring that information forward in a sensitive way and start to process it differently than if you just keep it inside or just deal with it yourself and kind of stew on it. You know Judge Latimore mentioned adverse childhood experiences, and I think that's a nice way for us to think about this. The original work, looking at adverse childhood experiences with Vince Felitti, Dr. Vince Felitti discovered that most of us, two-thirds of us have experienced at least one negative event during our childhoods and so that's a whole lot of folks. You know, two-thirds of folks, but it's the individuals that have four or more of those events that we get especially concerned with. And when you look at who's coming through early childhood court, most of those parents and most of those children are already at four or more and so if you think of somebody who's five years of age or younger having four events of abuse, neglect, or household disfunction like domestic violence, divorce in the family, death of a parent, incarceration of a parent, those are significant events. And you need safe spaces in order to process that information and kind of bring it to light and then kneel with it in constructive ways. If you don't, it can really just perpetuate a negative series of emotional and behavioral functioning events that really can impair all domains of living. So we want to address that pretty quickly if we can.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: Okay, and let's break that down. When you say impair all domains of functional living, what are we talking about? So a kid experiences something at two or three years old, or three or four events in their lives by the time they're three or four years old. What does that mean for them as they go through elementary and middle school? What does that



mean for them? What's going on inside of them while they're growing up, if that's not addressed early?

DR. RENK: Well, you know, I think we have to bring in attachment to that discussion. Like when we all enter the world, it is hoped that we enter the world to a family who is able to care for our needs. And every infant is looking for a predictable, caring caregiver, whether that's mom, dad, grandma, whoever that ends up being but we know when adverse childhood experiences are happening in families, that parents are unable or caregivers are unable to really provide that predictable care that infants need to flourish. And that disrupts attachment. Like we look for secure attachment and for the families coming through early childhood court, we know something has gone terribly wrong with how those parents are interacting with those children. And the children just aren't feeling safe. And so when you're not feeling safe in the world because you enter a family that is very chaotic or disrupted by these events, you're not able to feel stable on your own. And so that means there's going to be a lot of behavior problems. There's going to be a lot of emotionality. There's going to be a lot of dysregulations. And then when those kids start school, often times that the way that schooling is done in our society today, teachers aren't taking on that role of being a stable caregiver. You know, I've had pre-school teachers even tell me, oh, well, I'm just the teacher. It's like no, no, no, you're actually another potential grownup who can stabilize this child so sometimes substitute caregivers step in like that. But if they don't, we know that that spills over into behavior at school. But also ability to sit still long enough to learn all of the lessons that we need students to learn as they go through throughout their education.

JUDGE LATIMORE: And if I could just join in on that.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: Yes, please.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Then that could lead to disciplinary actions in school which also could lead to early intervention into our delinquency court system, right. So now we have them involved in the court system. And as they continue to exhibit these behaviors, and you know have difficulties with interpersonal relationships, there could be domestic violence at teenagers or younger ages. We could also have domestic violence in their household when we have ungovernable children per se. And so it could just – just snowballs. And if we have early access or early entry into the delinquency system, the data shows that it's likely that those individuals could continue to be involved in our criminal justice system or any other area of our court system. So that could be the long-term effect as well when it comes to the courts.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: And what I've read is that that unprocessed trauma is like –it's like a loop that's going on all the time going unsafe, unsafe, unsafe, unsafe. And so the ability even just to concentrate in school is so hard for a kid that has unprocessed trauma because their brain is constantly going the world is unsafe. And that sense of unsafety just alone is – just interferes with life. And you teach ACEs to judges --

JUDGE LATIMORE: I do.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: -- Judge Latimore. So let's just spend a moment, can you just break down in the condensed version what ACEs is for lay people and judges that are listening to this and other people that are listening?

JUDGE LATIMORE: Sure. I can do that but I feel really uncomfortable with Dr. Renk here so –

JUDGE BLACKWELL: She'll put her fingers in her ears right now and –

JUDGE LATIMORE: Okay, I'll just let her grade me at the end of it, okay. And so we'll do that.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: Good, okay.

JUDGE LATIMORE: But there it is. As she mentioned Dr. Felitti has an adverse childhood experience study that was conducted. And that consisted of a test which has ten questions. And it really focuses on five segments of function and how there's dysfunction in the family. So we're focusing on areas of abuse. We're focusing on areas in which there is maybe interpersonal relationships, individuals whose parents have gone to jail or absent. We're also dealing with mental illness in the household. We're dealing with violence in the household, sexual abuse, substance abuse, those type areas. And so with that we've learned that if there's a high level or you score high on that test –

JUDGE BLACKWELL: Usually four or more.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Four or more. Then the likelihood is that you're going to have significant long-term effects as a result of that. And that trajectory could lead to one, early entry into the criminal justice system. You could have mental health issues, educational issues, social issues, et cetera. And so why that is important to us is the fact that we can assume that everyone who we see in our court system has some experience with trauma. I mean, we can automatically assume that if they're standing in front of a judge, they've had some trauma in their family, right. And it's significant and it's caused them crises and as you know, as judges, we're here to kind of be the crises solver. But we need to be aware of the needs of those who come before us, not just that they want to have a monetary judgment, not just because they want to have a divorce. We're dealing with the fact how that trauma is just existent in these relationships that they have and we

must take that into account as well as considering as to how we treat those individuals when they walk into the courthouse doors. So I just want those who are listening before we get deep into the scientific area of adverse childhood experience is to understand that it is important that we are aware of adverse childhood experiences and how they may affect our children and therefore, I think it's important for the community to know that what you – what environment you create for your children, whether they're your biological children, adopted children, children who just are in your space, it is important that you understand that that could in fact have a long term affect on them. And we need to be cognizant of that and make sure we are taking better care of our kids.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: And I think what Dr. Renk said is profound, that if you ever get the chance to be that stable loving parental figure for a child, that's such a gift you can give that child.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Because it's been proven that if they have one positive stable relationship with an adult, that they can build resiliency and that even though they've had those negative experiences throughout their childhood, they still can be successful to overcome that. Do you agree with that, Dr. Renk?

DR. RENK: Yeah, I mean, that's based on seminal works of Emmy Werner who studied a whole population of individuals who were born during a certain period of time in Hawaii, where if you had at least one individual, one grown up in your world who cared about what happened to you and provided you with sense of that safety, you could do better than you would have otherwise. And you know as I think about the court system, I was thinking about the intergenerational patterns of things that happened. So I know when families come through to early childhood court or many of the other courts, we're focused on the kids but really if we look

at their parents, their parents also were impacted by things happening in their family. And now we're perpetuating a cycle because the parents are trying to figure out how to parent and you know, they'll often look at me and say, Dr. Renk, I don't understand. I'm doing so much better than my parents did for me and my kids still got taken away. Like, what's up with that.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: Yes.

DR. RENK: But it's because the parenting that they received was so poor and so disruptive to their development that they are actually doing better, but they don't really know what good enough looks like yet. And so having figures like trauma-informed judges to look up to, who really set the tone in the courtroom and who get that these folks are coming in with some really difficult experiences can be the difference between them doing well or not.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: So if anyone is ever interested in seeing the ACEs, the adverse childhood experience test, it's just ten short questions. You can find it online.

DR. RENK: Yes.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: You just google –

DR. RENK: You can google.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: -- adverse childhood experience test and find it. And it's an interesting thing to look at and see what the questions are because they're simple and easy. So let's talk a little bit then to – about what judges and courts can do, not just a baby court but any sorts of courts, like the ones that Judge Latimore presides over and other courts, the mental health court, the veteran's treatment court, drug courts, but all courts can do and be able to deal with the people that come before us. Because as Judge Latimore said, so many of the people that

come into courts are impacted by trauma or are there because of a trauma that has occurred to them. So Dr. Renk, you've got the mic, what would you want the court system itself to know because it's so much more than just judges. Because our front line is so many of our other people. It's our clerks, it's our staff, it's our judicial assistants, it's our –

JUDGE LATIMORE: Court deputies.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: -- people at the front door who are letting people through. What would you want them to know about dealing with the people that come to the courthouse every day?

DR. RENK: Well, it's interesting to think about folks who have been impacted by trauma and certainly I have a few examples in my head right now of how people act, but I think the main thing I want to draw attention to when you've been impacted by trauma, and then you're under stress like having to present to court for x, y and z issues that you have, like that's going to make you look a lot rougher than you might on a regular day. And so those social interactions are really going to be impaired in one way or another. And I don't want to excuse behavior. Like I often say that trauma is an explanation, not an excuse. And so you know I've had parents curse me out. I've had parents be really rough with their behavior and really kind of confrontational but again if you come at it from a perspective where, well, that's how they learn to protect themselves and that's how they deal with the world because they don't want anybody getting too close to them, you can give them a little bit more grace and instead of getting angry right away or getting very reactive yourself, you can kind of say, huh, well, that's super interesting. Like I wonder if that's a trauma response and again, it's not an excuse, but if you use that as an explanation, you may have a different approach to interacting with that person, getting them to settle down in a different type of way. And then things become much more productive across the

board for what needs to happen as they're interacting with you. And so always keeping that in mind where you know oftentimes people do lose it much more quickly when they're used to dealing with trauma or trauma-reactions but it's because they're ready to be on guard and that's a self-protective mechanism that they're using to keep themselves separated from anybody who can do them harm.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: So that's sort of a tool that we can use then as we work with people who come to court, is to know that sometimes the belligerence or the tears or the nervousness that we see in people may not be directed at us. I say us in the global sense here. It may be more what's going on inside of them.

DR. RENK: Correct.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: So that's a good tool. And Judge Latimore, what would you add to all of that from your experience in these courts that are dealing so directly with people that have literally been called out of the rest of the court system and put into a veteran's court or put into a drug court?

JUDGE LATIMORE: Yeah, I think what I would first remind everyone of is what Judge Lynn Tepper taught me a long ago is –

JUDGE BLACKWELL: She's a great judge.

JUDGE LATIMORE: She's wonderful, yes. And taught me so much about trauma and being trauma-responsive, and so when we have individuals who come before us, who may have you know, behavior of not so becoming to a courtroom or a judge, we do not ask the question, what's wrong with you. We ask the question, what happened to you? And if judges and court personnel take that perspective and take that approach, I think it's a lot easier for them to

understand that it is not that this individual is trying to be disrespectful. They're not necessarily trying to be, you know, to cause chaos, to cause disruption. They are in a place where they are trying to maintain in an unfamiliar environment. They are in a place where they may not feel very safe and it's up to us, as part of the court system, as part of all the personnel that this individual has to confront to be able to interact with them with an understanding of grace and empathy and compassion. And also be able to help them to realize that they are in a safe place and that we are here to assist them, not to harm them. So with that, the training of our personnel is very important to understand for example, that even though they may be yelling, we don't have to yell back. Even though they may seem not to be following our directions, we don't need to be upset and short tempered with that. We also can make them feel comfortable in the sense that we are here to assist them with being able to maneuver through a court system that many people don't know how to do that, whether they have trouble or not. So all of those things are very important in making sure that one, that we're not going to heighten their sense of stress and anxiety while they're here, but in fact we're creating an environment where they understand that we're here to support and assist them. And that doesn't mean that we're not necessarily going to comply with the law. That doesn't mean that we're going to give anyone a free pass. They are still going to have to go through the justice system the way that anyone else might have to, however this is a different approach. This is a different opportunity and it has been shown to be successful. And I think it's important that we do that from the very moment that they enter the courthouse doors until they are able to finish their business here and be able to leave.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: Well, now a lot of people would say, don't coddle people, don't be touchy-feely, so can you give us some examples without names of course, without identifying information, from your own experience where this approach has worked for you?



JUDGE LATIMORE: I think I could give several experiences, particularly – Dr. Renk is laughing. Particularly from our early childhood court, but I can tell you just the importance of a judge who is willing to maintain calm and just a listening ear to those who are expressing their angst, they're fearful. Their children have been taken. They don't think they're going to get their kids back. They haven't had the best role models. They don't live in the best environment. They may be homeless. They may be jobless. They may not have education. All of these things are happening. They're in a state of crisis. And so I've been called names. I've been yelled at, fussed at. I've been through it all at times. But the point is, is that I'm here to get that person to a point where they understand that I'm not here to harm them. I'm in fact here to be able to handle this case in a way that both they and their children are safe.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: And what techniques do you use to get them to understand that's what you're doing?

JUDGE LATIMORE: First I listen.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: Okay.

JUDGE LATIMORE: First thing is I listen because no one has listened to them before, right. Second, I'm willing to offer them some information and advice. Advice, willing to answer their questions. I'm willing to tell them that I can help to find the solution for whatever it is that they may be dealing with. That we are here to offer you therapy. We are here to help you with substance use disorder. We are here to provide you with domestic violence support and services. We are here to help you to build your relationship with your child and even your family who may have been difficult for you to have a positive relationship with. I think first and foremost, people want to understand that they're not just case numbers but that I actually see them.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: Yeah. And Dr. Renk, why is that important to someone who has trauma in their background?

DR. RENK: Because they've not had that before. You know, as Judge Latimore was speaking, I was flashing to some information from Circle of Security Parenting which is something that we use often in early childhood court. And it's a parenting program that's attachment-focus but the whole premise. Like one of the underlying themes of this program is that you're teaching parents to be bigger, stronger, wiser, and kind. So in other words, they're seen as the figurehead and they're setting limits appropriately, but they're doing so in a way that's not mean-spirited or out to get somebody. And when I watch Judge Latimore in the courtroom, I see her do that for the families that come through, be that bigger, stronger, but wiser, kind individual who really is going to be able to hold that family safe. But you know truth be told, judges who do it well and Judge Latimore definitely does this for us, like judges need to hold their team in the same fashion. Like the judge sets the tone in the courtroom, and so by doing things in the way that Judge Latimore is talking about, it lends something to the professionals who are working under that judge with those families or with those individuals coming through. But it also does that for the families, for the individuals who are coming through to have their cases heard. So that bigger, stronger, wiser, kind approach is something that most of them have never had before.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: Well, and in effect then the judge is modeling, who's working with the family is modeling for the family the kind of parenting you want them to do for the child.

DR. RENK: Exactly. I mean in fancy terms we call that parallel process where it trickles from the judge down to the team or the judge directly to the family. But if it goes to the team, then the team can give that to the family. And then parents can pass that on to their children. And so we need that trickle down to happen at all levels.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Because unexpectedly, in many instances those parents will look to the judge as they're that missing parent that they never had. Someone who can give them guidance, someone who can be a role model, you know be an example of the type of behavior that is expected of them as parents. I didn't know that before I got into the courts that I would be looked upon in that manner. And so it's a role that I've now you know accepted and I accept it willingly. But it really does start with the judge and it requires the judge to set the tone so that everyone in the courtroom understands. When you have lawyers, they tend to naturally want to argue their case and litigate, right, that's their job.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: That's how we were trained in law school.

JUDGE LATIMORE: And that's – right.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: Sure.

JUDGE LATIMORE: So there's clashing –

JUDGE BLACKWELL: And that's their job.

JUDGE LATIMORE: -- and there's conflict. We tend not to get as much done when we're in that type of environment. So the problem-solving courts are non-adversarial. We're taking a team approach. That means the attorneys, you're part of the team too because what we're doing is we're working together to help them be successful, to resolve this litigation.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: Well, what – you operate, Judge Latimore, in a perfect world for trauma-informed courts. So what would we say to our brothers and sisters on the bench who don't? They are in heavy duty high case number, process through courts that have every bit as much trauma, people who've experienced trauma as Judge Latimore has in many ways. They're in busy family courts, busy civil courts, busy criminal courts, busy juvenile courts. I'm sitting in a busy probate mental health and guardianship court. What can we tell them and the people that work in those arenas here, and the county judges who work in huge numbers dealing with people that come into traffic court and misdemeanor court, and the civil courts there? What can we tell them about being trauma-informed, Dr. Renk? Because they're going to see people for a much shorter time and not have the time to develop the personal relationship and have the ability to make the trauma-informed team. What can we tell them about how this has meaning to them? What can they do in the time that they have?

DR. RENK: Well, from my reflective supervision consultation work, a really perfect quote just keeps popping in my head and that is how we are is as important what we do. So in other words, if you approach somebody in a gruff manner, you're going to get the work done and you're going to see the cases, and that will be fine. But if you do it in a way that's compassionate, that takes into account that they may be having a bad day, you may be having a bad day, whatever the circumstances are, but how you are with that individual, how you handle yourself, how you choose to interact with that person can make all the difference. And even if it is one contact, it is still going to be memorable to them to be like wow, that judge handled it in this type of way and that was super helpful to get me through this process. And so how we are is as important as what we do.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: I think it's so important to remember that not just the parties that appear before us, but that the lawyers who appear before us, probably also are victims of trauma from time to time and need every bit as much compassion as we can give them too. They're not immune from these same effects as well, and that the people we work with in our courtrooms and that the people that meet – you know you meet in the hallways and all of that are still every bit as much in need of understanding and care.

DR. RENK: Yeah, absolutely. And I think this is a good place for us to mention secondary trauma or vicarious trauma, or when all of us who interface with people who have a heavy load of trauma and we take that on, so we listen to their stories. We hear how things were for them, or I think of our attorneys who are working sex crimes, things like that where they're having these visuals that they're exposed to or difficult things that they're hearing about. Like we are all carrying that around too once we interface with the system and that's a heavy load for everyone to carry. So it's not even that it happened to us directly, but that it is transmitted to us by the people that we are helping and wanting to prepare them to go through these processes that are involved with courts. And so us keeping that in mind that we all have exposure and that means we all have work to do to kind of have a sound foundation upon which we approach our day.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: Well, and what do we do with vicarious trauma? Does – what is a person supposed to do with that?

DR. RENK: Well, there are things like reflective supervision, consultation or I know child welfare is calling it coaching where you have somebody trusted that you can go to and share. I mean, oftentimes with the work that we do, it's confidential. We can't give blow by blow detail to our loved ones and we come home looking a wreck and you're like honey I need a

minute, or babe, I need to check out. And they're like what is up with you? It was a long day at work and they're like, I have no idea what that means. So if you have somebody in your office or your office handles things in such a way that there are team events where you sit down and process and figure out how to move forward with cases, if there's an external consultant that can come in and help carry that load and provide you some remediation for what's going on there, like all of that can be super helpful so that then you are shored up and you can go back at it the next day without carrying all that vicarious trauma around.

JUDGE LATIMORE: I think it's important that we also remember the judge, so the judge is also hearing and witnessing all of that trauma, and those trauma stories and having those cases in criminal law and domestic violence, and therefore could be a victim of vicarious trauma as well. And that's why I'm really big on judicial wellness and I think it's important that judges realize that they are not necessarily fully protected from having that trauma experience also. And so it's important I think that again that we all are trauma-informed and trauma educated. And there are plenty of opportunities to receive that education and training, and that can particularly be done for judges through the Office of State Courts Administrator. There are educational opportunities in person, on webinars, on the website. There are opportunities through colleges, Florida State University has a certification, trauma certification program, Level I and Level II that's available. I think it's important not only for those who appear before us but for ourselves to one, be educated in trauma, understand its impact, and how in fact we may experience it and that we need to deal with that. As Dr. Renk said, you know it's not just that individual, you also may be having some trauma that you're carrying with you and that can explain some of your behavior and reactions to what's going on. It's important, just to back up on some of the things that you're saying particularly about county judges, having those heavy dockets. They don't have

lawyers so they're having direct contact with that pro se litigant but I do think it's possible, even though they may not work in the same type of setup that I do, to just speak with your court personnel, encourage that they all be educated, informed, or trained, but also the judge gets to set the tone in the courtroom. And so that means that we don't necessarily have to be as harsh when speaking to someone because they're not quiet when we tell them to be quiet or they didn't sit where we told them to sit, or you know, things are happening that we like to maintain order in our courtroom, right. We want order. And sometimes that just doesn't happen the way we expect, but it's the response to it. And I think that if we at least allow – explain to our court personnel how we want them to treat those who come into our courtrooms, that that will help in a significant way to change the experience for those who walk into the courtrooms.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: Great. Dr. Renk, any final thoughts on trauma? How do judges learn? How do people who just want to know more about this topic, how do they get information?

DR. RENK: Well, the trainings that Judge Latimore mentioned just a bit ago would be excellent for everyone. But I think part of this process too is being self-reflective in saying, okay, how am I approaching things? Am I experiencing burnout? Am I overwhelmed? And so if the answer to any of those questions is yes, then it's definitely time to rethink and redo and pursue some of those trainings or think about who can help assist in providing an atmosphere, a work atmosphere that is going to facilitate the discharge of some of those burnout experiences so that everybody can again start over and say, okay, we're going to do this in a trauma-informed way, trauma-responsive way so that we're doing our best work with people who need us the most.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: And because our listener base is so wide to this podcast, if a person has experienced significant trauma in their lives, it's really good to get help, professional

help and let somebody hear those experiences in a safe setting and help you process them, isn't it?

DR. RENK: Yeah, absolutely, and there are lots of evidence-based program models that are therapeutic in nature that can help remediate that. And so if anyone is feeling like their personal traumas especially are impacting their life in any way but especially are spilling over in their work, and they're having to deal with individuals who also are carrying trauma, I mean we can call that compounded trauma where you have your own trauma and now there's added things that are contributing to how you're doing your work, then you definitely want to seek out a provider who can provide an evidence-based therapeutic service to you so you can get that under control.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: Right, and there's all kinds of types – different types of counseling, types of providers that can help you process trauma even if it was pre-verbal trauma in your childhood before you were a child, there's types of therapies, EMDR which I don't remember what that stands for but I know that there are things that can help even get to trauma that occurred to people as babies. And can reach that trauma that's kind of buried deep in your body.

DR. RENK: Yeah, absolutely, I mean I would recommend that anybody who has their own trauma and is wanting to seek out psychotherapy of one kind or another, look for a provider who does cognitive behavioral therapy. My favorite model is cognitive processing therapy just because it allows you to have exposure like any trauma-based therapy is going to have exposure, or trauma narratives as part of the work that gets done and it's meant to bring all that trauma out and bring it forward so that you can learn to manage it and become a little bit less sensitive to



being triggered about it. So any kind of cognitive behavioral therapy that has an evidence-base would be what I would recommend to somebody.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: We were – we in this court were trauma-informed many, many years ago. Back in the late 90s we even had a court care center here. Were you around for that?

DR. RENK: No, I wasn't here then.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: We had – we had students from UCF who were working on their psychology degrees, working in the courthouse and would go to the courtrooms and meet with people and we would actually offer up to four or five counseling sessions here at the courthouse. And we were trying so hard to be trauma-informed back at the beginning, and so we've had a rich –

JUDGE LATIMORE: Yes. That's amazing.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: -- history here of learning about trauma and trying to be trauma-informed. And so grateful to Judge Latimore. She's very modest. She said she was the – was big into wellness. She's actually the architect of the wellness program across the state. Is there anything else you wanted to say about the courts that you serve in, Judge Latimore, because you've really done a great job with those?

JUDGE LATIMORE: I do. And I just want to emphasize how important these programs are. Allowing individuals who have had contact with the criminal justice system, not only our early childhood court and our family dependency drug court where we're dealing with families and children, we're also having the mental health court, our veteran's court, and our adult drug court programs for the criminal justice system. Individuals who have committed misdemeanors or lower-level felony offenses have an opportunity to receive the type of therapeutic treatment

that they need in order to deal with the root of the problem that led them to some type of behavior or action that got them caught up in the criminal justice system. And so we want to emphasize that everyone in the criminal justice system are not bad people. They may have had bad experiences, bad childhoods, you know and we want to make sure that we give them an opportunity to address those issues so that they do not find themselves back in the criminal justice system. These programs have been proven to work. They provide intensive treatment for mental health, substance use disorder and also helping veterans who are dealing with the trauma of having been in the military service, often having post-traumatic stress system, I mean, syndrome, also anxiety, et cetera. So we are as a court dealing with those issues and offering them those services so that they can have a better resolution to their criminal cases that might keep them from being a convicted felon and also – and some tracks will lead to the dismissal of their cases. The data has shown that it's worked, and it's effective, and it allows them to become just positive and productive members of our society and therefore, reducing the rate of recidivism from them committing criminal offenses. And so these programs are very near and dear to my heart but not because I just think that people should be given a tap on the hand but because it will absolutely change their future, and it changes our community. And it changes the world in which everyone else will be able to live in including those children that I hope will never come into the child welfare system. So this is something that I thank you for giving us an opportunity to speak about. It's important and it's important that we get the word out as to what the services are that the Ninth Circuit is providing.

JUDGE BLACKWELL: Thank you both for joining us today and thank you both for the work that you do. It's such important work.

JUDGE LATIMORE: Thank you for having us.

DR. RENK: Thank you so much for your time.

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