

OPEN NINTH:

CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM

JUDICIAL SPOTLIGHT

MEET HONORABLE JEANETTE DEJURAS BIGNEY

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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 Jeanette Bigney, one of our county court judges in the Ninth Circuit. Judge Bigney got her start in the legal field right here in the Ninth Circuit State Attorney’s Office. But went on to work in private practice until her appointment to the Orange County bench in 2012. Through this appointment, she became the first Asian American judge here in the Ninth Circuit. I’m thrilled to have you in the studio today, Judge Bigney. Thanks for joining me.

JUDGE BIGNEY: Thanks for having me, Judge Munyon.

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

JUDGE BIGNEY: I grew up in the suburbs of Chicago and – well, I was born in the city of Chicago but I ultimately moved to Florida for law school.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So you grew up in Chicago, a lot colder than Orlando. I assume – you had to be a good student you know to get into college and law school. Did you have any extracurricular activities when you were in high school? Did you play any sports or on any academic teams or anything like that?

JUDGE BIGNEY: I did but what kind of paved the way going into public service, I went to a private high school and there was just a lot of community outreach and this encouragement to do community service hours. And at the time you kind of think you’re multi-tasking. You’re doing it for your college application, but it’s something that my parents instilled in me and it

gave me a great look into society and how I wanted to help the public. But aside from that, I ran. I did some gymnastics through high school before going on to the University of Illinois.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: You are Asian American. Your parents actually emigrated to the U.S. rather than your grandparents or great grandparents. So where did they come from?

JUDGE BIGNEY: My parents are from the Philippines and when I was younger, they were so proud to say that I was a first generation American. My mom came over on a nursing visa and my dad followed shortly after and that's where they raised their family, in Chicago.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: The Philippines are beautiful. Did you get to go back there and see family when you were growing up?

JUDGE BIGNEY: I – so with my parents' emigration status, I only had an opportunity to go back after they had their green cards so I was – I was just starting middle school and that was my only time going back to the Philippines. Now, coming from a place as modern as Chicago, going back to the islands like the Philippines, it was a little bit of a reality check. And I know we use the word, first world problems, I had first world problems in the Philippines as a pre-teen visiting, but I had a chance to meet a lot of family and cousins who I was only pen pals with.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And I'm sure you found the island to just be beautiful.

JUDGE BIGNEY: It is – it is gorgeous in the resort towns but when you visit a town like Manila which is a big city in the Philippines, it's a little – it's very different. Open-air markets, no obeying traffic laws, the sites and sounds and smells are just very different from how I grew up but it was interesting. And I look back and it now as a grown up and I think how neat it was, I wish I was up for more emersion as a teenager.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So you graduated from high school, you went to college at the University of Illinois. And what did you major in?

JUDGE BIGNEY: I majored in speech communications.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Oh, wow. So that – that sort of lends itself to being a trial lawyer, doesn't it?

JUDGE BIGNEY: It does. I wanted to write speeches. I actually started off thinking I wanted to be a dentist.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Really.

JUDGE BIGNEY: But I actually mentioned sites and sounds in the Philippines. Chemistry and biology classes, I could do the math, I could do the numbers but the smells and the sites were just a little too much for me. So I had an amazing speech communications professor that just kind of put me on this course to becoming a trial lawyer and eventually a judge.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So you got your – you majored in speech communications and then where did you go to law school?

JUDGE BIGNEY: I went to Nova Southeastern in Fort Lauderdale.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what drew you to Florida from Illinois?

JUDGE BIGNEY: This is something that – I wanted somewhere warmer. I wanted a chance to grow up a little bit more outside of par – away from my family. And when I realized University of Florida did not have a major airport, Fort Lauderdale seemed like a very good choice because I knew pretty quickly I'd get homesick.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Yeah. Yeah, Gainesville's airport is not very big.

JUDGE BIGNEY: No.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Would definitely be a lot easier to get to Chicago from Fort Lauderdale or Miami.

JUDGE BIGNEY: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what sparked your interest in the law? Why did you decide you wanted to go to law school?

JUDGE BIGNEY: Well, speech communication was something that, in my undergraduate studies, I really liked public speaking but at the same time I was involved in my sorority and other activities on campus doing public service work. I was a victim advocate when I was in undergrad working with – with college students who had been sexually assaulted. I worked with kids in disadvantage homes, helping them with academics. So it's just – there were so many things that kind of led into wanting to do public service at law school. And Nova Southeastern offered a public interest law fellowship which I had. So it made it a good choice to go on and I always thought I would be in a courtroom. But until you get to law school and until you start interning, you don't realize how many parts of the law never come into the court – never touch the courthouse really, just paper pleadings. So that led me to my job at the State Attorney's Office.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what made you decide to, you know, when you graduated from law school in Fort Lauderdale to come to Orlando?

JUDGE BIGNEY: I was engaged to somebody who already lived in Orlando.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Ah, okay, that would do it.

JUDGE BIGNEY: Yes, it did do it, very persuasive.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And you got a job here at the State Attorney's Office.

JUDGE BIGNEY: Yes. I was there for four years.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And tell me, how did you find that work? What did you like about it?

JUDGE BIGNEY: I did an internship in family law and it gave me a chance to encounter people and work with people. And I was at the legal aid society so people who couldn't gen – couldn't afford an attorney, so that gave me a little bit of a step inside the courthouse but I also did some of the domestic violence cases there. And I met some of the victim advocates who worked in this building and worked at the State Attorney's Office, so after talking to some of those victim advocates and meeting some of the attorneys around town, when it was time to apply for a job, and I was given an offer, I gladly accepted.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And it is fun work. I mean, your colleagues that you start practicing law with at the State becomes some of your best friends over your lifetime.

JUDGE BIGNEY: Very true. I feel very lucky to have those relationships. And especially being a county court judge, when I was in criminal I was working with a lot of – because I'm in civil now, I was working with a lot of new public defenders and state attorneys. And it would make me reminisce about how we would go to each other's hearings and watch and learn and talk about it. And then afterwards, even opposing counsel, we would all meet up sometimes for lunch or happy hours back in the day.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And you talk about esoteric points of the law and learn so much from each other.

JUDGE BIGNEY: Very true. Yeah, it's - it's a fun memory now that I'm looking back on my career for the past 20 years.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So you left the State Attorney's Office and went into private practice. What made you do that?

JUDGE BIGNEY: Well, I had a job doing insurance defense work. We were handling primarily premise liability cases. After a couple years there, when I – after I had my second child, I thought I wanted to stop working. And I'm not just – I'm not a great stay-at-home mom. I'm not great at multi-tasking. So my husband who's a lawyer, he would ask me every now and again to cover some juvenile delinquency cases and I was so happy to do it and I realized that I could build my own – my own legal practice handling primarily delinquency and dependency cases. And I opened it up to also do – to also handle school education and disciplinary hearings.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So I knew you loved juvenile proceedings. Is that where your love of juvenile proceedings came from and defending people, young children really, charged with delinquent acts?

JUDGE BIGNEY: I mean, I think it even goes back farther than that. Growing up I worked with kids, special needs kids and then even in college, going back and working with some of the kids in the Champaign Urbana area, but being a prosecutor and then handling the juvenile delinquency cases, I just – I loved working in a small forum and being able to appear in front of three judges so readily and building up my client-base and getting to know families.

Sometimes I still get Christmas cards from these kids who are now grown ups with kids of their own.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Wow, that's amazing. And the juvenile system is unique because it's not all about punishment, it's about correcting behavior so that they don't get into the adult system.

JUDGE BIGNEY: Yeah, it was – it was a good feeling to handle juvenile cases and get some of the results but you know there was also the risk of juveniles being direct filed which was hard to explain to kids and their parents, and even as – as an attorney, it was hard to think about my clients going into the adult system.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So how long were you in private practice?

JUDGE BIGNEY: About – about three and a half years before I became a judge after leaving the State Attorney's Office. So I became a judge around my seven-and-a-half-year mark as a lawyer.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what made you decide to seek the bench?

JUDGE BIGNEY: I like doing public service. I like being a friend to the community but there are so many colleagues that I have today, and who have retired, who encouraged me and set a good example and a role model of what a good jurist can be, and how you can apply the law and the skills and the facts and just – and be there for the community. And that's why I applied to be a judge so I'm very thankful for my appointment and my re-election just to have my job.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So you applied to be a county court judge. Why did you decide you wanted to be on the county court as opposed to the circuit court?

JUDGE BIGNEY: Well, I did apply for both jobs and I think back 12 years ago there was a real encouragement to – to start as a county court judge and then to work – to get some judicial experience and then apply to the circuit court bench. And I became – I started to chat with some of the members of the judicial nominating commission back then and they just really encouraged me to – they said keep applying to what you want but we would love to see you on the county court bench one day so make sure you're applying for those spots especially. And I always thought I would have aspirations to be a circuit court judge and to go back and handle juvenile delinquency work but it's now 12 – 11 and-a-half years in and I'm still a county court judge and I'm happy with that.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Yes, I haven't been able to talk you into anything else, unfortunately. Maybe one day.

JUDGE BIGNEY: Maybe one day but just as passionate as I was about doing delinquency defense work and handling juvenile cases, I love county and I love the people I work with and doing the administrative work and just feeling like I know what I'm doing and I can be put in almost any position in county court and handle it with – with some – with some skill.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So tell me about being a county court judge in Orange County. What is it like? What sort of cases – I know there are two different assignments but everybody may not know that. So tell me a little bit about what the life of a county court judge is like.

JUDGE BIGNEY: Well, when I took the bench, it was set up a little bit differently. There were a couple of different assignments you could get. In county court we have two-year cycles

and you could option and try to stay in a division for more than two years. But there was specialty courts and that was doing first appearances, domestic violence. Those are two aspects of criminal law and then county criminal trial work and civil trial work. Now, we just have a direct division between civil or – civil or criminal. In criminal I liked doing the first appearance, or as I call it, the jail work because you're handling everything from panhandlers to murder cases, and everything in between.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: That's a lot of work to do that day in and day out.

JUDGE BIGNEY: It is. It's – it's very tiring. It makes you really appreciate your weekends a lot more. And it also makes you feel really – really blessed to have a different lifestyle, to see people so down on their luck or in bad times. And I say that but county civil, we also have a lot of people who are down on their luck or having bad circumstances, but still the law is the law. We're evicting people. There's small claims up to \$8,000. In county civil claims up to \$50,000, so people being sued and nobody wants to be involved in the legal system unless they're a professional in it.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Right. So have you found the work has changed over the more than decade that you've been a judge? Is there more work to do now than there was when you started?

JUDGE BIGNEY: Yes, there's more work but with more than a decade worth of experience, I've learned to handle it better and manage things better. And know when I really need to hit the brakes on a case. I mean, I think all of our colleagues and all the judges, we're dedicated to what we do, but there's something about knowing when you need to hit brakes, take some extra time to research and say something doesn't sound like maybe it did four or five years

ago, I need to spend more time – more time on this. But it is a rewarding job, whether it's civil or criminal.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: With experience you do get a bit more efficient, I think.

JUDGE BIGNEY: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And you can see the red flags that you might not have been able to see when you first started.

JUDGE BIGNEY: Very much so. But you know you also don't want to get to the point where you become jaded or you think you know something or you can read into it because now that I'm back in civil, I was in civil several years ago and now I'm back on the civil bench, it's now month four for me and I'm still at the point where when I'm – when there's an eviction or some other kind of lawsuit and a litigant is crying, it makes me slow down and then I have to realize how much of this is crying, oh, wait, let me look at the notes from last time. They know – just learning how to read between the lines too.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Yes. So one of the aspects of being a county court judge is you have a lot of young state attorneys and public defenders when you're in criminal that appear before you. Do you enjoy almost teaching them what it's – how to be a good trial lawyer?

JUDGE BIGNEY: It's – it's a very fine line between – because I may be giving them guidance or rule in one way and be very specific with my ruling so the same thing doesn't happen again. That's also trying to prevent you know -- just for appellate purposes but I do enjoy that a lot.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: When you took the bench, other than, I mean I think most of us when we take the bench, you know our aspiration is you know I want to follow the law, I want to do a good job, I want to work hard. Did you have any other goals or aspirations? I know you're in some – involved in the county conference in some ways and you're involved in administration in the county court here. So were those initial goals or are those things that you just kind of picked up as you went along?

JUDGE BIGNEY: I picked up as I went along but once you become a judge there are so many opportunities, so many invitations, let's just say to get involved with voluntary bar associations or to speak at events, or go help out at a high school, or court admin will reach out and say, hey, can we have some students in your courtroom. So I didn't expect that but it has been one of – it has been just a good rewarding feeling to be able to do that and have those opportunities.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So do you have any advice for those that want to be judges or for our new colleagues that have recently taken the bench?

JUDGE BIGNEY: You know I think when I was applying to be a judge and I've also put two – two of my children are off in college, but just mentally you think you have to have x, y and z on your application or be able to say that you've done things. But sitting here and knowing how diverse our judiciary is, there are so many people who are so different than me, but everybody has a strength and just go with your strength and your passion and be knowledgeable. Because I'm not going to be like a judge who's given me advice. We're all so individual and in fact I have taken advice from judges when I was brand new and it worked for that judge but it didn't work for me and my personality. So just be true to your personality and who you are when you take the bench and when you're interviewing with the JNC or you're campaigning.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So we've talked a lot about the bench and what you do. And I know you work very hard while you're here. Do you do anything but work?

JUDGE BIGNEY: I think it was post-COVID and post like some medical concerns, but I really, really have learned to love and grow to appreciate a great work life balance. My husband and I we've been traveling a lot more. Again, that comes with being an empty nester. I enjoy skiing and there's –

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: I assume you mean snow skiing since you grew up in Chicago.

JUDGE BIGNEY: You know I didn't learn how to snow ski until I was a grown up. Yes, but snow skiing. My husband is good at it and I'm okay at it but I like being outdoors. I like out west, cold mountain air, not Chicago.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Wet – yeah. Wet, wet –

JUDGE BIGNEY: Right. Yes, I don't deal with lakefront cold.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Cold air.

JUDGE BIGNEY: Unless it's to see my parents, that is.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And your two kids are off to college and you are now empty nesters, so you and David can travel.

JUDGE BIGNEY: Yes. Actually one of them is living abroad so we went to Europe in March to go visit him and my daughter joined us out there. I think – I mean I know all parents brag on their kids but if there's one thing I can say I've done well in life is how I've raised my

kids to be so close to each other. They're 22 months apart but their each other's best friend. Sometimes you don't realize it but they really do like each other a lot so that's my parent prize.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, that's awesome. Well, Judge Bigney, thank you so much for joining me here today. It's been awesome getting to know a little bit more about you.

JUDGE BIGNEY: Thank you for having me.

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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