

OPEN NINTH:

CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM

BIDDING FAREWELL: LIFE BEYOND THE BENCH

FEATURING RETIRING JUDGE BOB LEBLANC

EPISODE 153

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HOSTED BY: LISA T. MUNYON

(Music)

NARRATOR: Welcome to another episode of “Open Ninth: Conversations Beyond the Courtroom” in the Ninth Judicial Circuit Court of Florida.

And now here’s your host, Chief Judge Lisa Munyon.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Hello, and welcome to Open Ninth. I’m here today with Judge Bob LeBlanc, who is retiring from the bench after 15 years of service. Judge LeBlanc joined the Ninth in 2007, starting out in the Orange County criminal division. Since then, he sat on the bench in our domestic relations and civil divisions serving as associate administrative judge for both. And befittingly he ends his time here back where he began in Orange County criminal. Now, after many years of dedicated service, he’s ready to explore what adventures life holds in retirement. I’m thrilled to have you in the studio today, Bob. Thanks for joining me.

JUDGE LEBLANC: Thank you so much for having me.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So you’ve been on the bench – we’ve known each other forever.

JUDGE LEBLANC: We’ve known each other for 30 years.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Yes, we have. And it’s hard to believe that you are getting ready to leave the bench after 15 years of service.

JUDGE LEBLANC: I am older than you.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Not a lot but – so tell me, what surprised you most about being a judge? Thinking back on you know, what you thought when you started.

JUDGE LEBLANC: I don't think the job itself surprised me that much because you know, I had practiced law for 18 years. I had been in front of all sorts of judges, not much civil, but I had been in some domestic, some criminal, dependency, delinquency so I think I knew what the job entailed. I think what surprised me most was probably the restraint that would be required of me. I was otherwise not a restrained person in general.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: You are very outspoken by nature and very gregarious. Did you find those constraints difficult? Because as a judge we can't – you know, we can't express opinions about politics and we have to be very careful about what we say about almost everything.

JUDGE LEBLANC: Yeah, I don't think I would say that it was difficult. It just constantly, at least the first few years I got used to it, but the first couple of years, it was a constant weighing in the back of my mind be careful what you say. And some people knew that I was thinking one thing but saying another, but it was the constant restraint in knowing I have to restrain myself after being so well spoken. When you're in private practice, you want to make a name for yourself. You want to make money. And so you're sort of throwing yourself out there in front of everyone and all of a sudden, I had to close that.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, having known you, both when you were at the public defender's office and when you were in private practice, you are a natural marketer and you know everybody. I mean, I can't go anywhere with you and you don't run into somebody that you know.

JUDGE LEBLANC: I don't know about that, but I would say that I am a natural marketer because I did my best to promote my law firm. When I was president of my

neighborhood association, I did my best to promote the neighborhood association. We started a garden tour and raised thousands for the Lake Eola Heights, you know, historic neighborhood association. So I always thought marketing – it probably was something I would have been good at.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, that probably explains why you ran for election as opposed to appointment because elections are about getting out and marketing yourself, and meeting people.

JUDGE LEBLANC: Yeah, and I think that before, while I was practicing law, there were some democratic governors and I had probably campaigned for some fairly liberal causes, so I didn't think I would be appointed by a republican governor and didn't take offense at that. Each side appoints whom they want and I realized in 2006 when there was a vacancy created by the legislature that wouldn't involve running against an incumbent, that that was my opportunity.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So other than the constraints on your speech, what other thing did you find to be a big challenge in being a judge as opposed to being a lawyer or a private citizen?

JUDGE LEBLANC: When I was in practice, in private practice, I had a law partner that managed the firm. When I worked as an associate, I worked for Bogin, Munns and Munns for five years they managed the firm. It was the first time I had ever been in a position where I had to manage my docket, so it was a learning curve. Judicial college helped with that. You were my mentor immediately, so you helped me with that, but actually learning to manage something for the first time in my life was a challenge.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, you've done a great job with that and you learned that lesson well.

JUDGE LEBLANC: So far.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And you've carried it with you to every division that you've been in. What will you miss most when you retire?

JUDGE LEBLANC: The people that have supported me daily getting through this job, court administration, trial clerks, court reporters, interpreters. All I have to do is get a docket from my judicial assistant and the huge number of parties that took me a while to realize that were involved in supporting that docket is what I will miss. Knowing everything there is behind you and supporting you, it's remarkable.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: I think as a lawyer and a litigant you don't appreciate the administration of the court system. All of the people that are behind the scenes making sure that we can do our job.

JUDGE LEBLANC: I do now. And I knew that every judge had their own judicial assistant and I had Cindy Brown for 15 years. I love her. She's been a friend for 30 years. I couldn't have done my job without her and I'm not sure I even realized what JAs did.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: I think most lawyers probably don't. They think they schedule and answer the phone, but they do so much more than that.

JUDGE LEBLANC: Right. They protect their judge in a lot of ways. Most JAs are very protective of their judges. I've noticed that over the years.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And they have to. I mean, they are the first line of defense to ensure that we don't receive ex parte communications from somebody just calling on the phone and saying, hey, I want to talk to my judge.

JUDGE LEBLANC: Right, and as I have come to realize, and I did almost immediately, they're also the first line in cementing your reputation one way or another. If you have a judicial assistant that won't answer her phone, that won't return phone calls, that won't return emails, you might earn a reputation as not being an organized judge. If your JA is on top of things, responds in a friendly manner to all emails and phone messages, it cements your reputation as being accessible.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Yeah, I think – I would imagine, you and I both practiced criminal law when we were in private practice, and somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew there had to be someone that ensured that interpreters were available when I needed them, and court reporters showed up for your trials. But you really don't have a true appreciation of the entire mechanism that supports the judiciary until you become part of the system.

JUDGE LEBLANC: I have an appreciation of it. I'm still not one hundred percent sure how it happens. For example, today I had one trial it was probably a definite go. All of a sudden, there's a court reporter there. Like how do they know I've got this trial that's going as opposed to just looking at the docket? How does the interpreter know? And so I know somebody manages all that. It's still a wonder to me.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, that means they're doing their job very well, if they can do it seamlessly, and even you with all of your experience don't recognize how it happens behind the scenes.

JUDGE LEBLANC: Seamless support is very important.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And we do it so well here in the Ninth. We have great administration.

JUDGE LEBLANC: Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what did you find to be the most memorable part of your job on the bench? Either a case or a moment?

JUDGE LEBLANC: Well, you know that mentoring has always been important to me. And even though I may have attempted it as a lawyer, I didn't understand the effect my efforts to mentor would have once I became a judge. People gave me more attention about it, but also appreciated the fact that I was making the effort. So even though I did it as a lawyer, it didn't seem to have the same impact and once someone saw that a judge was making the time and the effort to mentor, it became more significant. I've had over 20 law clerks over the last 15-and-a-half years. Some of them have asked me to do their adoptions, to do their weddings. Over half of them have asked me to swear them into the bar. It is so humbling when ten, not ten, when three years later they will text you or call you and say, Judge LeBlanc, I passed the bar, will you swear me in? You know, it's so humbling and so satisfying and that's one of the more satisfying things I've done over the last 15 years, was have those law clerks and have those relationships.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: You have been known for having law clerks the entire time that you've been on the bench, but you've also mentored lawyers in other ways and taught them in other ways. Can you tell us something about that?

JUDGE LEBLANC: You mean like through the Inns of Court?

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Through the Inns of Court, through brown bagging with the Bobs.

JUDGE LEBLANC: Oh, I forgot about brown bagging with the Bobs. So in the 90s or early aughts, Judge Kest had started a program, a lunch program with a free CLE hour called brown bagging, the brown bag lunch. When he retired, Bob Egan and I thought that we would take it over so for two years, we did brown bagging with the Bobs. We offered one CLE credit. I think we did it eight months every year for a couple of years and we invited everyone to bring their lunch, come for free. I spent 15 years going to every YLS luncheon, every CFAWL luncheon, every Paul C. Perkins luncheon, every Hispanic Bar of Central Florida luncheon because I thought it was important, and the Gay and Lesbian Law Association. I thought it was important for a judge to recognize and be there for them. And I think I was rewarded doubly by my continuous support over the last 15 years.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: You've been you know rewarded by your relationships certainly, but you've also been recognized by many of these associations for your efforts in connecting with their lawyers.

JUDGE LEBLANC: Honestly, sometimes I think I've been rewarded just for being there. I can't say I've done the most wonderful, brilliant things. I think I was just there. And I'm a friendly person; I'm a gregarious person. I shook their hands and congratulated them and I think a lot of my reward has been just being there.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, sometimes being there is –

JUDGE LEBLANC: Makes all the difference in the world.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Absolutely. They see that judges are human and they're approachable and accessible, and I think that's important for lawyers, especially young lawyers.

JUDGE LEBLANC: I think I made it known immediately in 2007, in January when I got on the bench that I was both approachable and accessible. There's still a limit. You're not overly familiar that you are disrespected or that the office is diminished, but I made it known right away that I was approachable.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: There have been a lot of changes in the 15 years that you've been on the bench. What changes have you seen in those 15 years?

JUDGE LEBLANC: Well, there's been a generational shift. When I was elected in 2006 and took the bench in 2007, there was still, over half the judges were what I consider the previous generation. Very quickly that changed, I mean within my first five years, I think one-third of the old guard had left and a newer guard was either appointed or elected and taking over. And there's some sort of shift in thinking with each generation. Each generation becomes a little less formal, a little less strict, a little more forgiving. So there's been some shifting there.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: And we're in the middle of another generational shift I think. We've had a lot of new judges come on the bench in the last two and a half, three years.

JUDGE LEBLANC: I find it hard to believe that I'm the oldest judge in this circuit. I would have never imagined it would come to that. There's certainly people that have been a judge a lot longer, but I'm actually the oldest one so I think it's a good time for me to bid adieu.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So you – really, you are the oldest sitting judge right now.

JUDGE LEBLANC: Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: That's hard to believe.

JUDGE LEBLANC: Well, if you think of the senior judges, I don't mean the senior judges but the older, I'm at least three years older than all of them.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Wow. Yeah, but you have crept up in seniority really pretty quickly.

JUDGE LEBLANC: I never even really noticed it and the only advantage was that I got to pick better emergency duty weeks or that I had some privilege in what my assignment would be.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: I would imagine that's one thing you won't miss is emergency duty weeks.

JUDGE LEBLANC: I never minded. I never minded. There is not one single aspect of this job that I ever minded because to me it's been such a great job for the last 15 and-a-half years. Of course, some days are a pain, some days are not. Some cases are weighing heavily on you, but every day it's just a great day to come to work and see what lies ahead.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Every day that I've seen you, you've seemed happy to be at work.

JUDGE LEBLANC: I'm always happy to be at work. I'm happy to get out of here, don't get me wrong. But I'm happy to be at work.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So what do you have planned for the future?

JUDGE LEBLANC: My wife and I are going to spend the summer at our house in Maine. We've had a place in Maine for over 20 years. In fact, we bought it after 9-11. It's not

the same place; we've since sold and bought another one, but we're going to go and spend the summer at our house in Maine and decide what else we want to do. I think that – I've really been working since I was 15 so I've been hustling for 50 years, either to make a name for myself, to make some money, to get re-elected, there's always been some reason to push myself. And I think I need six months to a year of just not crashing, because crashing isn't the right word, just resting without feeling like I'm hustling.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Right. A time not to have a schedule.

JUDGE LEBLANC: It will be nice to actually plant something and watch it grow instead of coming back four months later for a weekend and seeing that it has grown. It will be nice to actually see something grow and nurture it.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: So do you plan to do any law related activities after you retire?

JUDGE LEBLANC: I did get certified to do circuit civil mediations. I plan on getting certified to do family mediations. I've already been approached by several people to join a mediation firm or by several family lawyers asking me if I would do family mediations, that they'd love to have me. I think I'm going to take six months off and be with my wife. We love spending time together anyway so there won't be an issue there. I think we're going to take six months off and then figure it out.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, that sounds like a good plan. Do you have any advice for some of our younger judges? Because as I indicated, we have a new generation of judges that are on the bench now. Do you have any advice for them as you leave this aspect of your life?

JUDGE LEBLANC: I will only say this. Some of the younger judges seem less likely to approach some of the senior judges for mentorship or advice. They are more likely to approach each other. And I would suggest and recommend that they reach out to some of the older judges just for a lunch, you know, just for a shoot the BS session about things and gain some insight into the attitude of the different generation and use it and apply it in using your own judgments as a younger generation.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Do you have any advice for the more senior judges as you depart, things that you've noticed over the years and you just want to nudge your fellow colleagues about?

JUDGE LEBLANC: No. I think they've all done a fantastic job. They each have their own niche in what they're good at and what they love to do. No. I still look up to them and I always will. I don't feel capable of having advice for them.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Oh, come on, you wouldn't tell me to take – not to take myself too seriously?

JUDGE LEBLANC: You're my chief judge. I would not say that. I might tell you on mother's day if we out at a brunch somewhere, but not in the courthouse.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, you're going to be missed.

JUDGE LEBLANC: Thank you. That's very nice.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: I will miss you. Your colleagues will miss you. Court Admin will miss you because you are so well loved by everyone, not just the judges and lawyers.

JUDGE LEBLANC: Oh, that's very nice to hear but I hope everyone knows how much I love them in return. I've never had a disingenuous moment when I've had a conversation with someone. I want to remember their family members. I want to remember crises that they've had. I want to remember family they've lost. And I think I am humbled by knowing how well received I've been, that I want them to know I love them back.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, thank you. And thank you for joining me here today.

JUDGE LEBLANC: Thank you for having me. I will look forward to my – being able to say farewell to everyone on June 10th and leaving quietly and going to Maine for a nice summer.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Well, I'll make sure to have you back so that you can say hi to everybody.

JUDGE LEBLANC: Okay.

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Even if you're not sitting on the bench, we'll just have lunch.

JUDGE LEBLANC: I would love that. Thank you.

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

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