

OPEN NINTH

CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM

RE-RELEASE: OPIOID AWARENESS – PART II

EPISODE 161

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HOSTED BY: LISA T. MUNYON

(Music)

CHIEF JUDGE MUNYON: Hello, and welcome to Open Ninth. In honor of opioids and stimulants awareness month, we are re-releasing our two-part series covering our community's efforts to fight the opioid epidemic in Central Florida. In this second episode, former Chief Judge Fred Lauten sat down with Jessica Finn, a proud graduate of our circuit's drug court program to talk about her journey from opioid dependence to freedom. For many years, Jessica depended on alcohol and drugs to help alleviate some of the pain she still felt from her childhood. It was after a year of opioid use that she realized she was no longer using them to suppress the pain. She was addicted. But everything changed for her when she entered Osceola County's adult drug court program. Thanks for listening in.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: I'm here today with Jessica Finn, who is a graduate of the Osceola County Adult Drug Court, and she's here to talk to our listeners about her journey to recovery. And it's very courageous for Jessica to join us. So Jessica, I want to welcome you to Open Ninth. Thanks for being with us.

MS. FINN: Thank you for having me.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: So tell me a little bit about yourself, a little bit about your background. Where are you from? How did you get to Florida? Give me a little bit of biography for your background.

MS. FINN: I'm from New Jersey, and my family moved here when I was like 12. And I had an abusive stepfather growing up. And then, I think later in life, like, I resented him and things like that. So that's part of the reason I think I got into drugs.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Can we talk a little bit about your path to that? So you grew –
you moved here.

MS. FINN: Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Grew up here, and went to school, I take it, in Osceola
County.

MS. FINN: Mm-hmm.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Where did you go to high school?

MS. FINN: Osceola. Osceola.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Great.

MS. FINN: Mm-hmm.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Go to college?

MS. FINN: No.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Went into I understand to working in the airlines?

MS. FINN: Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: All right, what did you do with that?

MS. FINN: I was a flight attendant with AirTran.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And how long did you have that job?

MS. FINN: Six years.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Was it in that job that you first started –

MS. FINN: Yeah, I started –

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: -- using substances of one form or another?

MS. FINN: Mm-hmm. I started drinking and taking – well, I started drinking, and then my dad passed away from an overdose. And my best friend passed away from an overdose, and I was on a plane that caught on fire. And I guess from those traumatic events, I started to want to black out those feelings.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: The pain that you were feeling from those losses?

MS. FINN: Mm-hmm.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: So drinking, legal, not uncommon. But you started to combine alcohol with what?

MS. FINN: Pills, Percocets, Lortabs, Vicodin.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And did you do that because mostly you wanted to numb your feelings or was it a high that was euphoric? What kind of –

MS. FINN: A combination of both, kind of.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Was the flight attendant lifestyle kind of a partying lifestyle or not?

MS. FINN: Yeah, definitely.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Is that common – is that common to that lifestyle?

MS. FINN: Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: All right. So do you mind if I ask about how old you were when this all –

MS. FINN: Twenty-three.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: - started happening. So you were very young.

MS. FINN: Mm-hmm.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Flying with the airlines, flying all around. Had those – those traumas.

MS. FINN: Mm-hmm.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Started taking alcohol and then pills. And what pills? I think you might have mentioned, but what pills did you mix?

MS. FINN: Percocets, Lortabs, Vicodins. And then, later it got into Oxys.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Oxy being OxyContin or oxycodone?

MS. FINN: OxyContin.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: OxyContin, which is an opiate.

MS. FINN: Mm-hmm.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And then how long were you kind of engaged in that behavior?

MS. FINN: Well, I wound up losing my job.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Because of it?

MS. FINN: Because of it. And then I winded up started to get into the criminal, like – like, I got into trying to obtain a controlled substance under fraud. And I – my whole life just changed. Like I lost everything. I became a felon. I lost my job.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: So let's talk a little bit about that, if I can. And we can stop at any point if I'm, you know, if I go into an area that you just are uncomfortable talking about, just tell me. Okay, so you want to get these prescription drugs.

MS. FINN: Mm-hmm.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: But certainly, there was an era where it was harder and harder to get them when the state cracked down on pill mills and doctors who were conscious about I can't write these scripts anymore. So people who were physically addicted to the substances, it wasn't uncommon that they would forge a prescription, and that's what you did.

MS. FINN: Mm-hmm.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Any other criminal activity, theft, things like that?

MS. FINN: Yeah, mm-hmm. A lot.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And tell me a little bit about that. That I think is not uncommon for someone who is physically addicted.

MS. FINN: I just winded up getting a lot of charges, theft charges, possession charges, actually even a battery on a LEO. Like it was pretty –

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: So your life's spiraling kind of out of control.

MS. FINN: Right, and then once I was at a certain point, it was like I felt so guilty and so ashamed that I had to stay in that high and get more high just so I didn't have to face the wreckage that I've – that has happened.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Okay. How – Jessica, how quickly or how long did it take you before you felt that I'm physically addicted now to a substance?

MS. FINN: Like probably after a year, I felt that way.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And the addiction was mostly to opiates?

MS. FINN: Yeah, and then at the end, it started to be with crystal meth and opiates, but in the mixture of it. But I also tried to get off of it with methadone, which was just another way to get high, and then Sub Oxone.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: So we'll go into that in one second.

MS. FINN: Mm-hmm.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: So you obviously had to go to the streets to get crystal meth. And were you addicted to heroin? Did you try heroin?

MS. FINN: Mm-hmm. Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And I saw in a little briefing that I got that you tried fentanyl, and Xanax and morphine and so kind of the cocktail of drugs in the opiate family.

MS. FINN: Mm-hmm.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And how did that make you feel when you were taking those?

MS. FINN: Like I didn't have to worry. I didn't have a worry in the world, like, but at one point, it was just to not feel, just to feel normal, because I started to not be able – I didn't even really, I didn't feel like it was a high anymore. I just felt like I was trying to feel not sick and normal.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Right. So at some point then you go into treatment for these addictions. And tell me first how that happened, and where did you go from the street into sort of the addiction programs?

MS. FINN: Well, I started, like, I would get, like so fed up and my family, I was just really – my family was really hurting about it. And I would go into rehabs, try to get help, or I'd get arrested, and I'm like when I get out, I'm gonna, you know, I'm gonna do good. I'm gonna do good. And I had every intention of stopping and doing good. But as soon as I got out and was left to my devices, I would go back to that. And then um, but this last time was whenever I got put into drug court. And I – in the beginning I was trying to like sneak around and do stuff and still get by. And um, and then they put me in a 28-day program from there.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: In drug court they did.

MS. FINN: Yeah, it was a sanction that I got.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Now, had you done a residential treatment program before that?

MS. FINN: I had.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: How long was that program?

MS. FINN: I've done a six-month twice before that.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Okay. And that's not uncommon for people to go into treatment, relapse, go back into treatment, that's not an uncommon path –

MS. FINN: Mm-hmm.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: - as we know. While you were in treatment, so were you on – you were on methadone for a while?

MS. FINN: Mm-hmm. While I was in treatment, I detoxed off everything, so I wouldn't have anything in my system.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Okay. So but you mentioned that you attempted to get healthy with methadone and Sub Oxone, but that didn't work for you. And I'm wondering along the path, where was that? Was that before you were in a –

MS. FINN: Before.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: - residential treatment program?

MS. FINN: Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: You were in an outpatient program.

MS. FINN: Mm-hmm.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Okay. What did the methadone and Sub Oxone do for you?

MS. FINN: It just kept me in a fog still. I mean, it didn't – it kept me away from those other drugs. But then, I was mixing, with those drugs, I was mixing drugs that would work because they're blockers. So I would mix like other drugs that would work with them so I would still be –

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: So you're taking methadone and at some point Sub Oxone, but you were then going out and getting –

MS. FINN: Like meth or coke or stuff that –

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Right. Right. Okay. And then you get into the Osceola Drug Court Program.

MS. FINN: Mm-hmm.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: You had a 28-day in-patient rehab program.

MS. FINN: Mm-hmm.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And what treatment protocol were you given when you were in that 28-day, in-patient program?

MS. FINN: Like –

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: You said you withdrew completely.

MS. FINN: Yeah. And then –

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Okay.

MS. FINN: Yeah, they just suggested Vivitrol.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: All right. Let's talk a little bit about that.

MS. FINN: Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: So you're in that program. They suggest Vivitrol. And I know what Vivitrol does, but maybe you can tell our listeners, what does Vivitrol do for example that Sub Oxone doesn't do?

MS. FINN: I felt like it really cut my cravings. Like I didn't – I didn't have any cravings and um, actually I felt like I went back to the way I was before I ever drank or got high.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And is Vivitrol a treatment protocol for good? Forever? Or is it –

MS. FINNE: For – I did it for a year.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: -- temporary?

MS. FINN: And I was scared after the year to stop because I was scared to get off drug court because it had helped me. And then I got that done with. And then I was supposed to get off the shot after a year, and I was scared. But now, I'm going to have two years in February clean and sober.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Well, great. Congrats. That's wonderful.

MS. FINN: Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: That's fabulous. So let's talk a little bit about the Osceola Drug Court. So you go into it. It's presided over – when you entered it, who was the judge that was in charge?

MS. FINN: Whitehead.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Judge Whitehead, who's the problem-solving court judge for our circuit.

MS. FINN: Mm-hmm.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And a phenomenal judge and does a great job. And so what – what lessons or what sort of mantras were they teaching you in the Osceola Drug Court?

MS. FINN: Well, they made suggestions to go to meetings and get a sponsor, which I did that. And that's part of my recovery is – is that I have a sponsor and I help other women. And I – actually, I go into the Osceola County Jail and bring meetings to the women in there.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Did they talk to you about changing the people, the places –

MS. FINN: Oh, yeah. I had to change everything.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Completely, had to sort of reorient what you did.

MS. FINN: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And let's tell our listeners a little bit about that. So when people say people, places and things have an effect on your addiction, what do you understand that to mean?

MS. FINN: That I just can't hang around the same people. I'm going to have the same problems that I had. And that I want to hang around like people who are successful and have things going on in their life because that's where I want to be at.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: So people – are there other things that are triggers for you that might lead you back into that drug culture if you aren't careful? What –

MS. FINN: I think like becoming complacent, because I feel like I have the – I have the disease of addiction, and I have to do something every day for that. It doesn't just go away. Like

I can't just put the stuff down and be like, okay, I'm good. I got this. Every day I have to do something --

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Right. Right.

MS. FINN: -- for my recovery.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: You mentioned Vivitrol injections.

MS. FINN: Mm-hmm.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: So Vivitrol was a shot. How often did you take it?

MS. FINN: Once a month.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And you did that for a full year?

MS. FINN: Mm-hmm.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And then did the doctor say, okay, we think you don't need to take Vivitrol anymore?

MS. FINN: They said it's suggested a year. If I felt like when I got off of it, if I still needed it, that I could do it -- that I could do it again. But I felt okay. I felt good. And --

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Well, I heard that you got your driver's license for the first time in --

MS. FINN: After 11 years.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: -- ten, 11 years.

MS. FINN: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Congrats. That's great.

MS. FINN: Thank you.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And are you working?

MS. FINN: Yeah. I've had the same job for two years. I go into – the rehab that I was in, I bring a meeting into there with other recovering people to share their experience, strength, and hope. And I just – my life is like amazing now.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Great. So you go to the Osceola County Jail.

MS. FINN: Mm-hmm.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And you talk to women in jail?

MS. FINN: Yeah, because like I spent so much time there that I want those ladies to know that they don't have to keep doing this. Like there's a solution. And that – that if I can do it, they could do it because a lot of them know me. They're like oh, my gosh, you know, I can't believe that you're here doing this.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Can you give us a thumbnail of what you tell them? What's the message that you bring to them?

MS. FINN: That I was – I thought there was no hope for me. I thought I was hopeless. And – and that there is – that it's possible to change. For me, it has to do with God too. But it's possible to change. And that – and then once you – you can help – once you start helping others is whenever that change will happen. Because like once you're concentrating on helping someone else, it's hard for you to be stuck in your own you know misery. It's a great way to live.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: How long have you been going into the jail and doing that work?

MS. FINN: About six months.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Great. Great. Well, thanks for doing that.

MS. FINN: Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: This journey that you're on, did it result at some point in any alienation with your own family?

MS. FINN: It did. My family wanted nothing to do with me.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: For how long? About how long a period of time?

MS. FINN: It was getting to that point. But at the – at the end, they're like – they threw – they're like, we don't want you coming around here anymore. And when I was in drug court, the counselor said can she please come home? And so they let me. But my mom's like so relieved. She'd have to say that I – that I would have to think that you died. I had to mourn your death because I didn't know where you were and what was happening with you. So now she has her daughter back, and it's like – it's – it's like my living amends to her for what I put her through.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Right. Right.

MS. FINN: Because it was –

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And how big a family did you come from?

MS. FINN: I have two sisters.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And either of them struggle with addiction?

MS. FINN: My sister is not around. She's – we have her three kids. She's out there somewhere, and I pray for her because I know what that's like.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And she has an addiction to – to illegal drugs?

MS. FINN: Right. With all the people that are dying, it's just –

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: So let's talk a little bit about that. We know from a previous podcast that we did that – that opiate overdose deaths now are exceeding vehicular homicide deaths, or even automobile accident deaths, and murders in the community. So there's an epidemic both in our Central Florida community and in the state of Florida and in the United States because of opiate overdose deaths. Tell me what you know about that and what the chatter on the street is about opioids and addiction.

MS. FINN: I -- just it seems like people don't – don't care. Like a lot of times it would be like oh, that must be good stuff if people are dying from it.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Mm-hmm.

MS. FINN: But now that I'm on the other side, I'm like I can't believe this. This is so weird to be on the other side when you were that.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Right. And today I know that opioids are being mixed with fentanyl or carfentanil. It's hard to know precisely what you're getting. You mentioned that you tried fentanyl. How do you get your hands on fentanyl?

MS. FINN: Um, somebody from an – got it from – from an older – elderly people or someone that was dying from like a terminal disease.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Mm-hmm.

MS. FINN: Like I've done things to where I would – it's embarrassing to share this, but I – I couldn't find anything. I was sick so I pulled down the attic stairs and laid on the ground and called 911 so that they would come and bring me something to make me not feel sick.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Like a fentanyl patch. Did you ever have a patch?

MS. FINN: Like – like Dilaudid and stuff like that. So, I mean, that's just insane.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: It is looking back on it.

MS. FINN: Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: When you're in the middle of that physical addiction, though, you think entirely different.

MS. FINN: Right.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Right. So what message do you have for people about drug court and addiction? If you could say anything to our listeners about addiction and then about the drug court program, what would you share with them?

MS. FINN: Just that I was really hesitant. I almost was gonna take the time over drug court because I was like oh, I can't do this. It's impossible. And now I'm – the fact that I took all the suggestions like going to meetings, getting a sponsor, doing what they asked, going to groups and everything, it's like I learned so much about myself. And when I was sitting in drug court about to graduate, I – I was like, oh, my gosh. Because I was – you sit up where the jurors sit, or where you sit when you get sentenced.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Right, in the well of the courtroom.

MS. FINN: Yeah, because that's where they bring us from the jail to sit there. And I was like oh, my gosh, this year I'm actually like not getting sentenced. I'm actually graduating something. This is amazing. And it was. It changed my life. And like I said about addiction is something that you don't have to do alone. Like, you don't have to be alone to fight that. Like, it's not – there's people out there that will help you. People want to help you, and your life can be better than you ever thought possible. Like my life is like exceeds what I thought could happen. And I feel like there's only so much more that's gonna happen in my life, because if I stay on this path, that it's – it's good.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: You know I'm tempted end there but I do want to loop back because I want one other message to our listeners, if they know anyone who's got a physical addiction. It sounds like your path included attempts at treatment that failed and then a relapse and then attempts at treatment, failed relapse. And now you're in a really healthy place.

MS. FINN: Mm-hmm.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: So it's not uncommon for people who have an addiction to fail at their attempts at treatment, but then to keep going.

MS. FINN: Right.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And I'm gonna let you deliver that message to our listeners about not giving up because you might not succeed the first time. But ultimately, there's a path to success, isn't there?

MS. FINN: Mm-hmm. It took me 20 years. I was using for 20 years. And I tried and I – I – and I didn't think I could. I don't think anybody else thought I could either. And the fact that I can, it's – it's possible. It definitely is possible.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Great. Great. Well, any other message that you want to deliver to our listeners. You've been so courageous to come in and talk to us. And you've been so forthright and open with this. We really appreciate it. Anything else you would like to say before we close this out.

MS. FINN: Just that there's a whole bunch of people out there that are like willing to help you if you reach out and – and that's it.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Jessica, thank you so much for joining us today and sharing your story. And I know that it's a mixture of pain but you can also tell by looking at you, a lot of pride in coming as far as you have. So congratulations. And anything we can do in the Osceola County Drug Court to help you, let us know. But really, at this point I think you're paying us back by jail visits and by being a spokesperson for the success of the program. So thank you and best of luck in your future.

MS. FINN: Thank you.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: You're welcome.

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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