

OPEN NINTH:

CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM

THE WILD WORLD OF COVID

TIGERS, TRANSMISSION, AND TESTING

EPISODE 110

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(Music)

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

And now here’s your host, Chief Judge Don Myers.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Hello, and welcome to Open Ninth. We’ve talked a lot about COVID-19 here on the Podcasts. The virus has changed almost every aspect of our lives and its impact on the courts and our community is undeniable. But it’s important to recognize that its reach extends beyond our human boundaries. Although a zoonotic disease, COVID-19 affects both animals and humans. And so here to talk with me today about the broader impact of the virus on the animal world is the CEO of our very own Central Florida Zoo and Botanical Gardens, Dino Ferri. Dino, thanks for joining me.

MR. FERRI: Thanks for having me. We appreciate it.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, we’re really looking forward to the conversation because as news reports have come out about the COVID-19 virus, we’ve seen some stories about its impact in zoo settings and so I’m excited to be able to talk with you about that. But just a little bit of background first, if we could. You’ve been working in the zoo world for a long time. Tell us a little bit about your career.

MR. FERRI: Yeah, I’ve been in it for about 25 years, you know, it should be longer, based on my age. But I took a few years and tried to figure out where I was going in life. So I got into the business when I was about 30 years old. I went back to school, got my degree when I realized my first option of no school wasn’t getting me very far. So I went back, graduated up in Detroit, started at the Detroit Zoo as an internship and from there I went to a small zoo in East Texas. From there, I went to the New Orleans Zoo, the Audubon Zoo, spent ten years there through Hurricane Katrina, all that. So I’ve had my share of disasters with zoos in trying to, you know, cope. From there, I went to Virginia to Jacksonville and then down here to the Central Florida Zoo.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: That's incredible. I mean, you can't hear that history and not ask questions about Katrina. I'm really fascinated. I mean, what impact did Katrina have on the zoo there in New Orleans?

MR. FERRI: As far as physical, you know, we were – the zoo sits in one of the highest parts of the city so we had absolutely no flooding on zoo grounds. It was actually such a high point that all the military that came down to work, like National Guard and you know, to keep order in the city stayed on our property. So we were very secure during all the unrest. That is for sure. Other than trees down and stuff like that, you know, it was – overall, compared to the rest of the city, we did – we came out like rock stars.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, that's incredible. So for you, why zoos? What is it as you were in that discovery process about what your future held that led you to the zoo?

MR. FERRI: I think, like many, I, you know, I was always into animals as a kid. I thought I wanted to go to college. I started it. I realized I really didn't like it, so I opened up a pet store. I got into the pet business and I opened up a pet shop, and I remember I was helping a reptile wholesaler back in the Detroit area, unpacking an order from, I think it was from Asia at like 3:00 o'clock in the morning and as we were unloading it, literally forty to fifty percent of the animals arrived dead. And I remember asking them, is this – how do you get your money back? And he goes, oh, no, this is normal. And right there I was like, this is not what I want to be in. The next day I went into work, I put my business up for sale. I enrolled into college and I wanted to get on the conservation end of it, not the, you know, the cute cuddly end of it.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, that's fascinating, in particular in light of all of the conversation around the Tiger King and all that, I think is a cultural stop – a way-point, I guess, really, a cultural way-point for us in time, conservation is critical and I think that's a really cool decision. So is there a piece of the animal world, some part of it that really grabs you more than another?

MR. FERRI: You know, I spent most of my zoo career as a curator of herpetology so over, you know, all the creepy crawlies as most people call it, but I started as a fish guy. So I started with fish, fresh and salt water and then I like to say I evolved into the reptiles.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So we want to talk a little bit about COVID-19 and how from an animal perspective or from a zoo perspective, you know, what the impacts might be. But let's go just one-step further back and talk about this term that we've heard a little bit in the media of a zoonotic disease. What is a zoonotic disease?

MR. FERRI: So that's a disease that can, you know, basically hop from animal to human and vice-versa. But it's typically like when we're training staff, you know, we do a training here once a year for all staff reminding them about zoonosis. It's something that you have to be careful and you know look out for. And this is – this is, unfortunately, a great example of, you know, how – what can happen with such – such an illness.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, zoonotic diseases are not unique or new, I guess, and they've been around. I think we've seen some other examples of those in recent history.

MR. FERRI: Yeah, I mean, you know one of the more popular, well, not popular, one of the more common ones is salmonella. I mean, you know, a lot of people, you know, back in the day when people would buy little turtles, they came out with a law that they had to be over four inches in diameter. And the rationale was, which really never made sense to me, the rationale was you know a kid can't put it in its mouth for the risk of, you know, getting sick, et cetera. Well, you can still kiss it, but that's one of the most common – one of the more common ones is just salmonella. It's something, you know, that you can get from pretty much anything that's kept in water, dirty water, just poor husbandry, just, you know, dirty cages. Reptiles, specifically, it's really a reptile heavy, you know issue.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And other things too, like the swine flu, the bird flu, Ebola, all examples of zoonotic diseases, right?

MR. FERRI: Yep, tuberculosis, I believe is another one, you know, some of the TB's.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Yeah, and so we talk about animal populations having those diseases and potentially transmitting them to humans. What about this idea of humans transmitting diseases to animals? Do we have some examples of that that might be familiar for our listeners?

MR. FERRI: I don't know about familiar. I think one of the biggest things for you know right now was, obviously, you know, regarding COVID was New York. They were – the Bronx Zoo was the first zoo to show positive, you know tigers that – that got COVID from the caretakers. But you know there are – there's – I'm sure there's a slew of them. Unfortunately, off the top of my head, I don't know. I should have – I should have got with my veterinarian beforehand, just to confirm. But, you know, there are – there's several things that definitely can go back and forth. It's, you know, it really is quite a large variety.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And so you mentioned the Bronx Zoo. Tell us a little bit about what was discovered there. What was the species and how did they discover it?

MR. FERRI: Yeah, so from all the recollection and -- all the articles, rather and discussions that we've had on like the various, you know, news groups for zoo directors, it was they had some cats that they heard – some of the – it was tigers, and heard like it was wheezing, respiratory issues, similar to like, you know, if a person gets it. And they did some testing just because it – that was early on when COVID was really first starting to be an issue and really starting to make itself well known unfortunately. So they were, I think, doing the right thing and just making sure, they tested it, did the same type of test on the cats. They came back positive and just through, like we're doing now with people with the tracing of it, it was traced back to a staff member.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And so if I recall correctly, it was a tiger initially and then since then, four more tigers and three lions have tested positive as well.

MR. FERRI: Correct.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: All there at the Bronx Zoo.

MR. FERRI: Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And I'm reading articles as I researched for this about domesticated pets as well now, that they – they've discovered the virus in dogs, in house cats.

MR. FERRI: Yep.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Same process, same issues.

MR. FERRI: Yeah, absolutely, exact same thing. And you know, that's – not – I don't want to bring any of my other beliefs into this, but that's one of the issues like with, you know, outdoor cats. I mean, if it's an outdoor cat that's living in a house, you know, back and forth, inside/outside with somebody that's potentially positive, you know, now it spreads it to other cats, dogs outside and it's just potentially, you know, it's a vector.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: I mean, my mind jumps to then this idea that a disease that was transmitted from an animal to a human, COVID-19 as you and I might suffer it, and then from a human back to an animal, tigers, lions, cats, and dogs. Is it conceivable at least that those even domesticated pets could be carriers and spreaders of the disease?

MR. FERRI: I won't speak with a medical knowledge, but as far I understood everything, absolutely. Absolutely.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Fascinating. Any other types of animals that you're aware of that are at risk at this point?

MR. FERRI: Yeah, so AZA, you know, the association that we belong to is the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, it's an international association just kind of for zoos and aquariums. We're the, I don't know, I like to say, we're the gold standard of zoos. We are accredited. We get inspected. We got standards we have to live up to. So when this all first broke out, first they said, you know, obviously the felions, the cats after the Bronx, then it was any canid species, wolves, you know other things that are in captivity, in zoos. They also said primates was the first one that they really thought was going to be a big one mainly because, you know, us and gorillas, we're so closely related that they thought that was going to be a high risk. But I don't believe to date there's been any cases of it going from, you know, human to gorilla, but they say small carnivores and oddly enough pigs. Pigs are another one that's a high, you know, it has a – it has a – it has the alpha-receptor for the COVID that is, I don't know how to say it, but it basically would work well with the COVID species as far as bonding to it. So it's another high risk.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And I think that's true. I think I read that pigs, they call them great mixing vessels for these types of COVID diseases, the H1N1 flu virus, some others I think that have been around, so they must have an incredibly powerful receptor available for that.

MR. FERRI: Yep. Yep.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So let's talk a little bit about the Central Florida Zoo and some of the measures that you've had to take during the course of the pandemic. Obviously, one of your primary focuses has to be keeping the animals safe.

MR. FERRI: Absolutely.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So talk to us, as the pandemic has evolved in time, what are some of the measures that you've undertaken out there to keep the animals safe from the virus?

MR. FERRI: So from, you know, from when this first happened and the county issued their, you know, the closures of pretty much most places, when we close down, you know, that's fine, we're closed down, there's no risk, we're not spreading it, you know, to guests. But then the question became, well, now, if we have one person on our animal team that gets sick, now, potentially that spreads it to everybody on the animal team. If we have our animal team out, now, who's caring for the animals? So one of the common themes that went around through AZA facilities where they made an A Team and a B Team, just like they're doing in some of the schools now, where you know, alternating days you have alternating staff come in so that there's not any overlap. So if somebody on Team A gets sick and that has to be quarantined, we still have Team B to come in and clean house. So that was the first thing that we did. Once we found out we were – and we also had PPE. All staff working near any animal, not just the high risk, any animal, had to wear a mask. You know, super disinfecting, just going a little bit more higher and above what we already had been doing. And then when we opened to the public, it made it a lot more interesting because some of our barriers are not six feet. And everybody picked that six foot was the magic number, so we had to put a lot of – a lot of added barriers, especially around the cats, the pigs, you know, the primates, we did it just to be sure, all the small carnivores, we made sure that it was at least by minimum six feet distance, if not further. So it made for a little bit ugly scenery. Honestly, by the time people came out after, you know, two months of cabin fever, I don't think they really cared about the extra barriers and the appearance. But yeah, that was a big thing. And those are still all up in the zoo now. As you walk around, those are – those will be there until, you know, who knows when, with no end in sight. So there's that. And then we also, once we opened, we have our – the zoo's being cleaned all day long from opening until we close, we close early now. We close at 3:00, last person out. At 3:30, we have staff that

walks around and just continuously does a big circle disinfecting all the touch points throughout the day as people are here. And then from 3:30 until 5:00, our normal – what we used to be open until, that last hour and a half, a whole crew goes out and just basically disinfects everything in the zoo that, you know, everybody says needs to be disinfected. So it's a lot more in, you know, costs and doing the right thing and making sure that we're a safe environment for people to come out.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So safe for both the animals and your visitors.

MR. FERRI: Yeah, absolutely, because animals, obviously, that's our thing, but it's also without visitors, I don't have a zoo. You know, we can't sustain. We're not financially sustainable. It's the wonderful patrons of Central Florida coming through our gate that keep us here.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So from a zookeeper's perspective your biggest fears and concerns.

MR. FERRI: My biggest fears and concerns, well, as an animal person, it's always going to be, you know, the safety of the animals, for sure. But as the CEO of the zoo, it's the financial stability. I mean, you know, it's the reality. It's -- sadly in just those two months closure, we lost 1.5 million dollars in revenue compared to the previous year in that same window of two months. So you know, by the end of the year we'll have lost 2.4 million dollars, just from things we know that are no longer going to happen. If there's another man – you know, mandated closure, then it will even be a bigger loss because we're not doing events. We're not doing school fieldtrips. We're not – you know, all the things that were revenue generating are no longer right now.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Okay. And I imagine, I mean, the virus and the pandemic have been very fluid in nature. We keep learning more. We're constantly learning and having to adapt and adjust. Is that true for you at the zoo as well?

MR. FERRI: Oh, absolutely, yeah, absolutely. It's – it's – I say it's kind of funny but when all the zoos closed across the US, 98 percent of the AZA facilities throughout the world were closed at one time. Never happened before ever. So when we all started opening back up, you know, one of the things we do here are giraffe feedings. It's a great revenue generator for

us. The giraffes are enriched by it. The guests, you know, love it. So it's huge. But as the zoos started opening, no – not one zoo wanted to be the first zoo to open giraffe feedings because again they say giraffes were a low risk, but you don't want to be that zoo who all of a sudden has a giraffe come down with COVID. So I would post on our listserv to all the CEO's, all right, who's doing it? And it would be nothing, so finally a couple of zoos started and now we are doing it, and you know, since zoos have started it, there have been no issues, you know, with giraffes getting COVID. There's been issues at some zoos with staff working the giraffes getting COVID from the guests, you know, the guest service people selling the foods because the guest, you know, they got it from a guest but the animals, no issue whatsoever.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, and I trust, we haven't said these words, but it sounds to me like it's clear, no cases of COVID-19 in your animals at the Central Florida Zoo?

MR. FERRI: That is correct. And I'll tell you, we even went out on a limb, you know, we had a health concern with an animal. Our vet said, you know, he was – you know, confident, there was no – it was not a COVID issue, but I said let's test it to be sure. I want to – I want to make sure. We got the animal in hand. Let's do it. It sounds like the smart thing to do but that's a risk because if it did test positive, we have to notify the Feds, we notify the State, it's going to be a whole big, you know, possibly closing things down. And so it was a risk, but again, it's the right thing to do. But it was negative. It's was just – the vet was right; I should have listened to him from the beginning.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, that's good news. Well, I am so grateful, you know, to have this conversation with you and to be able to talk about candidly what is one of my favorite attractions in Central Florida.

MR. FERRI: I appreciate it.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And I think that right now this is a great time for folks to head out to the Central Florida Zoo. There's lots of space. You can socially distance and at the same time be able to catch some of our great local sights and the good work that you all are doing at the zoo. Thank you so much for joining us.

MR. FERRI: Well, I appreciate it. I appreciate the opportunity to speak of it. It's what I know. It's what I love.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: We wish you all the best. Thank you.

MR. FERRI: Thank you. Take care.

NARRATOR: You've been listening to "Open Ninth: Conversations Beyond the Courtroom" brought to you by Chief Judge Donald A. Myers, Jr. and the Ninth Judicial Circuit Court of Florida. For more information about the Ninth Judicial Circuit Court, follow us on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn.

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