

**OPEN NINTH:
CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM
MILLIONS SERVED
EPISODE 64
DECEMBER 17, 2018
HOSTED BY: FREDERICK J. LAUTEN**

(Music)

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

Now here’s your host, Chief Judge Frederick J. Lauten.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Hello, and welcome to Open Ninth. I’m here today with Mary Anne De Petrillo, the Executive Director of the Legal Aid Society of the Orange County Bar.

Legal Aid was founded in 1960, and provides legal assistance to low-income residents, the working poor, children, and disadvantaged groups with special legal needs in Orange County, Florida.

Mary Anne has her juris doctorate from Loyola University of New Orleans College of Law, and she practiced at Ford and Minkoff for five years before taking on the role of Executive Director in 1984.

Mary Anne, welcome to Open Ninth. Thanks for joining us.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** Thank you very much for having me.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** So you’ve been with Legal Aid for about 35 years. That, by the way, is an amazing accomplishment. Congratulations, and thank you. And what an inspiring display of dedication to law and to our community.

So can you paint a picture for our listeners of what Legal Aid looked like when you first started?

MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO: We had six lawyers, and -- we had two experienced lawyers and four inexperienced lawyers. And we did primarily family and housing and

consumer, very similar to what we did [sic] today. But Orange County's population was much smaller at the time.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Exactly. True. Right.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** And we also ran the Guardian ad Litem program, where attorneys represent abused and neglected children.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Where was Legal Aid housed when you started?

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** At the Orange County Bar Center on North Orange Avenue; 880 North Orange.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** All right. And where is it located now?

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** We are at 100 East Robinson Street in Orlando, across from the Diocese of Orlando.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** So how is the Society different today than -- certainly the location differs, but what else differs from when you started?

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** We now have 19 lawyers; 11 attorneys that work with pro bono attorneys representing abused and neglected children; in Juvenile court we have 8 other attorneys who represent low-income clients in a variety of areas; family, housing, consumer, immigration. Immigration is a difference in time -- in terms of substantive areas that we do now. We also -- we concentrate on safety and stability issues for clients that are poor. Because there's so many issues for poor people that that seems to be the thing that was most important to us is to make sure that their families were stable and secure.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right. Right.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** So in all of the areas we do, we're looking to make the families more stable, raise income and protect them from violence. So we do a lot of

domestic violence. We do a lot of landlord/tenant. We did a lot of mortgage foreclosure recently. We help people that are immigrants obtain legal status in this country so they're here legally and working.

We do a lot of -- we do sealing and expungement. Right now if a person is arrested, and even if they're not charged or convicted of a crime, that's on their record and it hurts them with employment. So there's a possibility under Florida Law to seal and expunge the record. That makes them more employable, so we do things like that.

We also run a special Wills project for AIDS clients.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Wow.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** We do a Veterans project where we go to Lake Nona, the VA at Lake Nona, and also at Baldwin Park -- sorry.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** It's okay.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** And we help veterans with the many legal problems they have. We have a Homeless Advocacy project.

We're able to do this not just because of our 1900 lawyers, but we also have over 1500 Bar members of the local Bar and some that actually don't even belong to the local Bar who volunteer to help us.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Fifteen hundred lawyers --

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** Fifteen hundred. And they did 16,000 hours of free legal services last year to help our clients.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Wow.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** So we also mentor -- our staff also mentors and helps them in that kind of work.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** That's amazing.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** So the Bar is amazing here; absolutely amazing.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** That's great. Yeah, we're going to talk about the Bar in a minute.

Let me ask you this. I know in 2009, forward the Great Recession, that probably the tsunami that hit your organization, and the court system, but impacted you, I'm sure, tremendously, was residential foreclosures.

Right now is there one area that demands most of your attention? Is there one hot area, so to speak, more than any other? Is it deportation, with this administration, or is it something else, or nothing, or just kind of equally spread across all those areas you just described?

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** Well, there -- through most of those areas there are special challenges for clients, and we're not sure if they have legal remedies or not. We have a lot of Central Floridians who have temporary status to stay in this country that are Haitian or from Central America and they were given temporary status. For years it was temporary, but it went on for years. But they're all expiring. And there are people that have worked in our community for years in the hotel, motel, retail industry, and we don't know if there's any legal remedies to allow them to stay and contribute to our community.

The other -- the biggest challenge we've had in the past year is we had so many new residents that came over to our area from Puerto Rico because of Hurricane Maria.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** From Puerto Rico, sure.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** And a lot of them were unable to get access to their paperwork for birth certificates to enroll kids in school, to have their custody documents, because the courts there were essentially closed.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** And so we've been working very hard to try to help them.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** I see.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** A lot of their legal problems are going to be in Puerto Rico with their homes there, but -- that we won't be able to help with. But making sure they got into school was a big thing.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** And then trying to sort out the custodial relationship and to figure out what we could do to help was a huge thing. And of course the laws in Puerto Rico, like they are in our other 49 states, are very different, and so people are not -- have to learn Florida law to know their landlord/tenant rights or their consumer rights.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Sure. So how does a user of your services qualify? So how does one qualify for Legal Aid help?

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** We have different criteria for different clients.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Okay.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** It depends on our funding source.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** Most of our clients, it's 125 percent of the poverty level. So that means the poverty level and 25 percent above. But we do have special guidelines for people who have extreme medical problems where they can -- we can take them even though their income may go up to 200,000. For veterans; because some veterans get disability that's under 200 but more than 125, so --

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Two-hundred thousand or two-hundred percent?

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** Two-hundred percent of poverty. I'm sorry if I said that wrong.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Okay. Right. That's okay. That's all right.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** Two-hundred percent of poverty, and so we do have special categories, and sometimes a grant source will allow us to help people.

Right now, we have a Special Community Economic Development Grant from the Florida Bar Foundation, and we're working in certain neighborhoods in Orlando that more -- where more than 50 percent of the people that live in the neighborhood have an income that is not what they call the United Way's ALICE amount, which is 43 --

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** Forty-three percent of Orange County residents do not have enough money to pay rent, utilities, food.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Forty-three percent of our residents?

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** Forty-three percent of Orange County -- and so we're concentrating on helping the people in those neighborhoods see if there's a way to -- working with other non-profits like Jewish Family Services and United Against Poverty to see if we can help them increase their employability, remove barriers to employment, help them with their consumer issues, make sure they're getting child support, to try to make those -- make the financial stability greater for the family.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right. Right.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** So that's something we're doing now. We have -- there are 20 neighborhoods that we're targeting for that kind of assistance.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** So you mentioned ALICE. Just so our listeners -- that's Asset Limited and Income Challenged. But that's a pretty significant number if 43 percent of the households in Orange County are Asset Limited and Income Challenged now. You know, there is -- we do kind of have a low-income, low-wage service force and a tourist-service force. But I -- that number surprised me when I heard it. That's a pretty alarming number.

But if someone were to ask you what kinds of cases walk through the door more than any other kind of case, that's a little hard to answer. It would have been foreclosures, of course, five years ago. But now it's --

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** Now it's family and housing. I mean, it's still family and housing and landlord/tenant.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Okay. Right. Right.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** There are not a lot of rentals in Orlando.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** Landlords want to make more money on their rentals so they try to get rid of a lease so people lose their lease or -- you know, so you try to --

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right. Right. Right.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** So it's housing and it's family. We do a lot of domestic violence cases. Our juvenile cases are way up too.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Wow.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** So the -- but family and housing are always our biggest need for poor people.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** I have to think that turning someone away is a painful experience but may be necessary because you're limited in the number of services that you can provide, like anyone is. What percentage of people do you have to turn away?

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** We have a policy of trying not to turn anybody away. If we can't help them, we refer them to another agency.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right. All right.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** There are a group of people where they hope that they can fix their problem legally, but the law is not always fair and just, and sometimes we have the unpleasant experience of telling someone that they really probably should talk to a legislator because the law is not --

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Okay. I see. The law is the law, and you're likely to lose.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** But there are another -- you know, the Bar has the lawyer referral service, they have a Modest Means panel for people that we can accept, some of them above our guidelines, some not.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right. Right.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** Most of our clients are working-poor people. I know people think that that poor people are on public assistance, but they're not. Most of them are working-poor. Their problem sometimes is the wage may be 10 to 12 dollars an hour, but they're only getting 30 hours a week. That's the problem of living in a community where we have a lot of tourism. And so a lot of those employers, hotel/motel, they think of full-time employees as a 30-hour week, and that's not enough to escape poverty when you have two or three people in your family.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Yeah. Yeah. Right. Even 10 to 12 dollars an hour with a 40-hour week -- and I know this because my wife is the CEO of the Homeless Coalition. With housing as a cost consideration, and then in our region with transportation, because we really don't have a robust transportation system, that even a 40-hour week job at 10 to 12 dollars an hour, with the cost of housing, makes people challenged about homelessness. I mean, they're homeless-challenged because even -- so they're working, as you said, they're working-poor, but with transportation and housing costs it eats up their paycheck so quickly. So if you go through the Cost of Poverty exercise, you realize, holy smokes.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** Most of them have to share rental -- I mean, they share a lot of rentals.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** And that's a big problem right now, because with the limited housing and landlords wanting to charge more for housing, maybe they didn't write who their roommate was on their lease agreement, and so the other mom with two kids is going to have to go where they're going to have to lose their housing with the landlord.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Yeah.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** So -- but there is a lot of sharing of -- I don't know -- I mean, I often -- you know, it's the kind of question you want to ask clients; how are you making it. Because it really is a struggle for them.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Yeah.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** And that's why you think, oh, my gosh, if I were them, could I handle what they do. I'm very -- it's very rewarding to help people that are so deserving.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Sure. You know, we have kind of a visible chronic homeless issue, and we've made strides as a community so it virtually ended veteran chronic homelessness. But still working on chronic homelessness. But there are families experiencing homelessness or families who are near homeless, and that's a real challenge for us.

There was a fascinating -- I don't know if it was Dateline or 60 Minutes -- I think it was a Dateline story recently, that L.A. County in L.A. has 55,000 homeless individuals living in tents in the heart of the urban core. And, you know, it's just an unmanageable problem. Fortunately, we're not there. But our families facing homelessness is a real crisis, and I know that they use your service.

Well, let's switch for a moment to tell our listeners about the unique relationship of the Orange County Bar Association and providing pro bono legal work as a condition of being a member of the Orange County Bar. Why don't you explain that model to our listeners?

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** In 1960, when we were created, as you said, Bar members decided that the civil legal needs were not being met and they weren't sure how to deal with them. So they had their wives or other people, like Junior League, come in and answer the phone at the Bar Center and call up lawyers in town and ask them to take a case. And they rapidly became overwhelmed with the number of people that were out there.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right. Right. Right.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** So in 1967, they created a staff program. The first director was Judge Prather, who I happened to get to practice in front of as a young lawyer. And the staff grew from there to -- and the staff was to compliment the Pro Bono program and to take cases that were too difficult to send to a private attorney, had time constraints that made it difficult to send to a private attorney. So we've always been based on pro bono in the Bar here.

And the Bar had a real commitment. They said, if we're going to do this ourselves, everybody's got to commit that we're going to support Legal Aid. And so for a number of years it was one case or \$150, every member agreed, as part of their membership to do. Today it's two cases or 350, referred by us. We also have a lot of special projects in community outreach and education that we do. And pro bono attorneys make us able to do all of those things.

We have a remarkable Bar. I'm always surprised when a young lawyer says they went to a meeting down in Ft. Lauderdale or they went to a meeting in Jacksonville and they realized that they didn't have mandatory pro bono. And I think --

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** They were shocked.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** They were shocked. And I think it's because when you come to Orange County and you join a firm, that you're told -- or you want to belong to the Bar and network and get new business and referrals from lawyers; that's where business comes from. You join the Bar and you think it's like that everywhere. But we're really blessed to have lawyers able to do that.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right. Yeah. I want to be clear to our listeners. So in order to practice law in the State of Florida, one must be a member of the Florida Bar. So that is an organization under the umbrella of the Florida Supreme Court, the regulatory body for lawyers, the State is the third branch of government to. So you have to belong to the Florida Bar and you have to pay dues to the Florida Bar.

The local Bar Associations are voluntary Bar Associations. So one can practice law in Florida and not be a member of the Orange County Bar. But if you join, voluntarily, the Orange County Bar, then you commit to -- well, first of all, there's a little bit of a dues statement -- payment, I think, to the --

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** Well, they pay -- it's really -- if you go to all the luncheons, you get your money back anyway.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Yeah. Right. You pay --

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** It's about \$137 or something like that.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** But then in addition to that -- now, I can't do it because I'm a judge, because I can't practice law. But when I was a lawyer and I belonged to the Orange County Bar, then I agreed, as a condition of membership, it was voluntary, nobody forced me, that I would take a case, or two now, or pay initially \$100, but now \$350. And, you know, it's second nature to us.

And I appreciate what you said. You go to Ft. Lauderdale or you go, you know, to Jacksonville and you go their Bar Association and you mention that to somebody and they look at you like you've got a third eye; like, you could do what. But -- so that's a real credit to the Orange County Bar. And we're kind of a nationwide leader, as I understand it, in that area. And so we're -- I know how grateful you are to the Bar, but it's encouraging that we have that commitment.

Any idea about how many voluntary hours you receive from the Orange County Bar a year, roughly?

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** Well, last year, 16,000.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Oh, that's right, and you said that earlier, 16,000.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** Over 16,000 hours of -- and so you can calculate.

Those are lawyer hours. What is the going rate?

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** You probably know better than me. At least 250.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Depends on your specialty. It would be 250 to 300, 350, sometimes it's 400.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** At least -- it's more. And so --

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** It's hundreds, so there you go, if you do the math, yeah.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** So some of the very best lawyers in town are out there doing the work.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Yeah.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** And -- but also is good for young lawyers, because it gives them a chance to try a case that they might not otherwise do.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right. Right.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** To have a real person client instead of a corporation that they really don't know.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right. Understandable.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** It gives them a real person to talk to and --

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right. And sometimes they're the lead attorney, where they haven't been a lead attorney.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** Right.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** And they say, boy, I felt like a real lawyer.

But I know what you hear frequently, and I know you hear it more than I do, but I hear it, is that maybe the most rewarding work in one's legal career, certainly up to that point in time for young lawyers, is the pro bono work that they did. Certainly they, you know, appreciate having a job and appreciate having clients, and have to pay their rent or their mortgage. But really, in terms of rewarding work, rewarding at Legal Aid is some of the most rewarding work.

What's the biggest challenge you currently face in the Legal Aid Society?

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** That the Bar and Legal Aid are not big enough to serve our growing population. The Bar is grow --

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** That's my challenge in the court, by the way, too. But go right ahead.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** Right.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** We have a common message here.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** I heard you at the Bar luncheon yesterday. I mean, Orange County is growing so rapidly. And I know people say, oh, you have all these lawyers, and it's true that we have lots of law schools, lots of lawyers. But the general population is growing much farther -- faster than the Bar.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** And we recruit people that are not OCBA members, even, to do pro bono. But the -- it -- just keeping up with the population and keeping track of that is very difficult. Our clients don't have safety nets like a lot of places. And some places in the State there aren't jobs, so there are -- they do have a group of clients who may have public assistance or other things. But in Orlando, most of our clients have no safety net things. They don't have -- it's too hard to get food stamps, so they don't have food stamps. The waiting list for Section 8 housing, so cheaper housing, or for child care are two or three years away. And so a lot of people moved here for work so they don't have families to fall back on. So they're coming through our door and coming to us and we would like to be able to respond more, and that is really a problem.

But I think it's the court system too. I know that judges are like, all the time, can you do more. In Juvenile, we've been -- the last month in Juvenile we had 157 appointments in one month to -- and there are not that many lawyers in Orange County to keep the pace of 157 new children coming into Juvenile every month.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Wow.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** So I know the judges are stressed. I know that Family Law is stressed. And we try to do the best we can, but it is difficult for the judiciary and for organizations like mine.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Yeah. Yeah. I'm going to -- if you'll permit me to, as briefly as I can, I want to summarize a little bit. My message to the Orange County Bar yesterday was that we have qualified for new Circuit judges last year, two; we got none. The year before, three, we got none. We've qualified for an additional judge in our Circuit every year for twelve years and we've gotten none. And the growing population has caused so much stress on the use of the court system that I closed our pioneer Business Court, moved those two judges to Family, because we really have to get families help. They just cannot wait. There are decisions that the court has to make and only the court can make about child support, alimony and time sharing, and we cannot ask families to just wait till we can get to it. And so that's kind of my common message.

And I know that that impacts you too, your ability to get in front of us. We did expand Family Court, so now it's larger than it's ever been, and I added, in my term as chief, three judges to that division to -- just to get to those cases.

Is this current pressure the same pressure you project out going forward five, ten, fifteen years for Legal Aid, or do you see other challenges?

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** I think we're going to continue to grow. There was a point in time when I thought that we -- where it had slowed down a little bit, maybe ten years ago.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right. Right.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** And I thought, well, maybe it's not going to continue to grow at the pace that it is. But it is still continuing to grow. Because there are other issues in other states that drive people here. I think a lot of people that have -- the recent -- all the new people that have moved from Puerto Rico to the United States -- I mean, to the mainland, so to speak, because they are U.S. citizens.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** I think a lot of them are going to stay because they're not going to have jobs when they go back. It really is -- I think a lot of people think that it's better, but it's not.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right. I mean, there's virtually still no infrastructure there.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** I went to law school in New Orleans. I love New Orleans. But New Orleans had a population of over a million people when I went to school. And they got down to, like, 300,000 people. People left the city because they didn't have jobs or infrastructure. And even today, there are only over just a half-a-million people. So I think of that example and I think of Puerto Rico, and I realize that families -- they have to have their children in school, they have to do other things; there are jobs in our tourism arenas for them.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** So I think that that -- I think they're going to stay, so -- I don't know how many are going to stay, but I think a lot of them are going to stay.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right. Right.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** And I guess we'll see.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Yeah.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** I think wages need to somehow go up, because it's just -- I don't know when the system breaks down and you have your tent cities because there isn't enough -- I don't think it would be great for our tourism industry to have tents all around Downtown Orlando.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right. Right. Right. Referring back to that same show, one of the speakers said we were so focused on chronic homelessness that we forgot families that were nearly homeless. They became homeless, and now they're living in tents, you know, all across L.A. County. And it's a real political issue and a real challenge to subculture, these people who desperately need help. You know, and I hope that our community never gets to that point, but it is a huge challenge.

If you could change any one thing about the Legal Aid Society, what would you change, if you could wave a magic wand? I guess it's funding, but --

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** Well, funding, but also to get wonderful -- more staff. I have wonderful staff. We have staff with 30 years, 35 years' experience, and we have brand new attorneys. And we have wonderful staff. So --

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** So if a benefactor came and plopped a million or two million dollars in your lap right now, could you put new staff in that building, or are you --

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** No. We've been looking for a new building since 19 -- well, just before the economic downturn, so about -- we were looking before 2008, and then everything happened.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Okay. It slowed down, yeah.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** And we -- and the Florida Bar Foundation ran out of money and all kinds of things happened.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** The -- much of the wealth of the Florida Bar Foundation was from real estate transactions. They stopped, and so --

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Yeah. And there was no -- virtually no interest being paid on trust accounts and so that dried up. And it was a terrible -- it was a tsunami of, you know, that money just went away.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** And so we're looking for new money -- not new money. We're looking for a new place now. Our problem is we really need to be in the center because we have clients in Apopka, we have a poor transportation system, and so we have clients in Winter Garden, we have clients in Christmas and Bithlo, we have clients all over Orange County. And so we need to be centrally located and visible.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Yeah.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** And we also, since we work with pro bono attorneys, we need to have -- for them to have easy access to our office.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right. Right.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** So we have been looking, but we --

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** So, I mean, that's a challenge, isn't it?

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** We've made a couple of offers, but we haven't been successful yet.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Well, if you -- so there --

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** That's something that, I think, after me, they'll be working on.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Yeah, right. So, Mary Anne, I mean, when you say centrally located, I don't know if that translates to urban core. Of course, then if translates to urban core, you're paying the highest per square footage rates for rent, so it -- I'm sure it's a conundrum. Like, we need to be in -- either close to or in the urban core, but then you get to these higher rents, and that's tough, isn't it?

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** Well, we're looking from -- we've been looking from Michigan to Colonial, and from OBT to, like, Mills or beyond. So that's where we've been looking.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Right.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** We have looked in -- west of I-4. We have had some opportunities, we've made offers but we had them lost, so we're just hoping the right space becomes available. Because we have had a couple opportunities. We have looked on the other side of OBT, which I think is probably -- I think we might just have to build because we have 43 employees and we have 20 to 30 volunteers every day in our office.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** You're sitting on top of each other over there.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** So we have no parking. Yeah. We -- when I gave a room to one of my attorneys that used to be a phone -- one of those phone rooms with equipment -- so, yes, we are kind of squished.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Yeah, you are space challenged.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** And unfortunately our -- we have a very old building. It was built in the 1920s. Very sturdy building, but they -- it has concrete walls everywhere, so it's not easy to renovate it either. But we are --

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** It is a great location.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** It is wonderful for clients.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Yeah.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** The good thing with our -- with the transportation being the way it is, somebody can come to the Downtown bus station, get on the freebie bus, even a disabled person, and get right off at our office.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Get to you all. Yeah, that is good.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** So it really is very -- it is great for hearings for our clients -- very much.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Yeah. Yeah. And you're pretty close to the Downtown courthouse, so a pretty good thing.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** Oh, yeah.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** So what's your -- I mean, first of all, 35 years; that's phenomenal. And congratulations again. How much longer are you going to go?

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** Probably in -- probably, I think, 20 -- the end of 2019 is what I'm thinking about.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Gotcha.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** That's when I hope to leave.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Okay. And what's your vision for the future of Legal Aid then?

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** I have some wonderful advocates like Larri Thatcher, who runs my Community Education program, Bethanie Barber, who runs my GAL program. I have some wonderful people coming up. And Angel Bello-Billini and Cathy Tucker and I started together and we'll probably be leaving together.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Wow. Going out together.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** So we have some wonderful young advocates that we've tried to prepare to take over for when we leave. So that's -- we have really a depth of wonderful -- it's the Bar's public interest law firm, and really great people to carry on, I think, when we're gone.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Well, Mary Anne De Petrillo, I -- you're a legend in the Legal Aid organization in our region. Well deserved, and I mean that as a high compliment. And then the work that you do and the dedication you've shown for 35 years, and the work of all of the people you work with, including your staff, is so vital and important to our region and our community.

You know, a court system isn't worth much if people can't access it. And you provide access and guidance to people who probably need the court system the most. And so, as Chief Judge of the Ninth Circuit, let me publicly say thank you to you and to your staff and to the attorneys and to the volunteers, and recognize, again, how vital and important the work is.

And I appreciate you taking time out of your busy schedule to talk with us today. And thanks for everything you do.

>> **MARY ANNE DE PETRILLO:** Thank you very much, Judge Lauten. I really appreciate everything the judiciary does for us and everything you've done. I really appreciate it.

>> **CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN:** Thanks.

>> You've been listening to "Open Ninth: Conversations Beyond the Courtroom" brought to you by Chief Judge Frederick J. Lauten and the Ninth Judicial Circuit Court of Florida. For more information about the Ninth Circuit Court, follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

(Music)