

OPEN NINTH:
CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM
PARTNERS IN HOPE
EPISODE 67
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HOSTED BY: FREDERICK J. LAUTEN

(Music)

NARRATOR: 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: Good afternoon, and welcome to Open Ninth. I’m here today with Judge Heather Rodriguez and with her, if I may say so, beautiful daughter, Ella Grace. And I want to thank you both for joining me and taking time out of both of your schedules and being here today.

And I understand that last summer both of you traveled to Kenya, not on a vacation but as part of a humanitarian mission to work with orphaned youths in Kenya. And in what particular city? You’re going to have to help me with the pronunciation.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: We were in Naivasha. It’s about two hours outside of the capital of Nairobi.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Okay. Great. And I’m curious how you ended up there. How did you, Judge Rodriguez, and your daughter -- how did you get to being in Orlando, living in Orlando, and deciding to take a humanitarian mission to Naivasha?

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: You got it. You got it right.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Okay. Naivasha.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: I think the right person to answer that is Ella Grace.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Great. Okay. Ella Grace, are you the catalyst behind all this?

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: I actually am.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Okay. Great.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Actually, I've been wanting to go to Kenya and Africa since I was six years old. We saw a children's choir sing at our church one morning, and I turned to my mom and I was like, I want to go where they live and I want to sing and dance with them, too, there. And actually, there was a mom that was behind us and she was like, are you sure; you're going to have to take a lot of shots to go to Kenya and Africa. And I was like, oh, yeah, I'm willing to do that. And I was scared of shots at the time, but I wanted to sing and dance with them so badly.

And when they offered an opportunity to sing and -- not sing, I'm sorry -- to travel to Naivasha with a youth group, I asked my mom, I was like, I think this is something that I would really love doing and I feel like we would really have a wonderful time and really learn a lot.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: So you met people from Kenya.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And that was what peaked your interest in traveling over there, just to be -- see the culture, just to see the country they came from and their culture?

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: It was -- I think the dancing and everything was there, but also we had actually a couple of individuals stay with us that were from Kenya.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: Yeah. She left out part of the story.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Okay.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: So I'll add. But what happened that day is they -- the children's youth choir came and they were a group of orphans from Kenya that had been brought over to the states for a choir tour to see our culture and to get some educational opportunities while they were here. And she loved them so much, our six-year-old insisted on going to the second church service so she could see them again.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: That says something.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: So we spent the whole morning in church that day. And then that summer, they made a request for host families to host the kids because they were coming back. So this was when she was seven. And she leaned over to me and she said, Momma, we have room. And I said, well, we may have room but we don't have time.

At that point, I was the mom of two small kids, a full-time attorney at a large firm. I mean, there was no time to bring in, you know, three, four young kids from another country and their chaperone into our home. And she leaned over again and she said, but Momma, we have room. And that just really resonated on my heart. So we welcomed them into our home, and I have to tell you, it was the best week.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Now, when was -- how --

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: That was the following summer, so that was when she was seven years old.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Seven years old.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: So we had them come and stay with us.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: What grade is seven -- what grade is six and seven?
Somebody's got to remind me.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: I think you were first -- or no, second and third.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Second.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: Because she was a young kindergartener.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: So now you're living with folks from Kenya. What impact did that have, Ella Grace? What was that like?

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: I still have recollections of spending time with them. When we would go home and we would be in the house, they would be there and they would pick my two-year-old little brother up and just carry him around all time, which we weren't used to because we were like, oh, he's capable of walking. But I guess in culture -- in their culture there, they always carry the babies, even if they're two or three years old. And I really -- I loved that.

And we had -- I remember we had a pool party, and that was so much fun. And all of the other host families brought their kids from choir tour that stayed with them all over to our house, and we had a pool party and I got to meet even more kids. And I remember just completely falling in love with who they are and --

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Great. Okay. So, you know, one thing our listeners probably are wondering is what grade you're in now and what your age is right now. Because when you can't -- when you only hear a voice, sometimes it's a little hard to guess. So why don't you tell our listeners, what grade are you in and how old are you now.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: I'm currently in 11th grade, and I'm 16 years old.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Okay. So we're back to you're six and seven years old.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: You know, younger than most, that you want to go to Africa.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Yes. Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: You know, a lot of people want to go to Africa to vacation or to go on a safari or just to experience a different culture. But you didn't want to go to Africa

just to drive around the country, is what I understand. So how did your desire to go to that country grow into being part of a humanitarian mission?

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Well, I have always loved serving. When I was first given the opportunity to serve, we served for, I think, the first World Hunger and we did -- just basically just collect food bags and everything, and street eats. And I just remember falling in love with service projects.

And then by the time I was in middle school, in 6th grade, they offered the opportunity of going on choir tour, similar to that in Naivasha. And I just remember they offered a choir tour where we were able to travel to different cities all over the country and serve in different homeless shelters and nursing homes there.

And throughout the -- throughout my middle school years, during the summer I would spend about a week-and-a-half of my life traveling to Chicago, New York, Washington, DC -- where else -- the Keys and North Carolina, just completely serving in those areas, and I just fell in love with it. And I think from that, I was able to grow.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Well, let me ask you just briefly about that. So Chicago, Washington, serving who? Who were you serving in this country; underprivileged, poor, homeless? I'm curious what kind of service.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: We -- I would say pretty much all of those, for the most part. We would serve -- like every day, we would sing, serve and play. So we would -- because we were the youth choir, we would sometimes go to a church and sing in their service then. And then later, we would serve in the soup kitchen and help out the homeless.

And what I also loved is that after we would sing we would actually meet the people and get to know them after the service or after we would distribute the food for -- from the soup

kitchen. And just being able to just meet those people and individuals that I would have never met if it wasn't for this opportunity, and get to hear their stories really inspired me to actually create this film, so....

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Okay. So let's -- I want to talk about the film in a minute.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Oh, sorry. I'm so sorry.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: That's fine. I'm glad you've introduced that there's a film. Because I've seen your film and it's fabulous.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Thank you.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: But let's talk about -- so you're here, you know you want to go to Naivasha, or at least Kenya. You know you want to go to Kenya. And you have experience at a -- again, a very impressive young age of reaching out and serving your fellow citizens. And congratulations to you for that. Very impressive.

But -- so how does it come to be, this -- this particular trip and this particular service to Kenya? So how did you get to that point?

Judge Rodriguez, maybe you want to tell us and maybe Ella Grace can fill in, or vice versa.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: So -- sure. Our church has been sponsoring this program since its inception in 2004, and has been very engaged with it. And they offered an opportunity for a specific youth trip. Every year a couple folks go over a couple times a year to work with the -- at the time they were called the Panua youth. Now the program's expanded so much we call it Inua.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And does that mean anything that I -- our listeners and I should know about?

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: It does. So in Swahili, panua means to expand.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Okay.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: And initially when the project was first conceived in its first years of operation, it was expanding the opportunities for youth in Naivasha. Now, because the youth are so engaged, as you'll hear, about their own learning and their own opportunities, the youth came to the leaders and said, we think it's time we change our name. And so they changed their name to Inua, which means lift up together. Almost, like, if you think about it like an Amish barn-raising type project.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Right. Right. Okay. Great.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: So it's to lift each other up together.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Great.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: And so that's -- the name just changed in October.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: So your church has been doing this for years, and so you picked a year to do it. Is there an age requirement or --

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: For this particular trip they wanted youth. They wanted teenagers to be able to go, and the requirement was --

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Okay. Thirteen to eighteen, or --

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: I think it was high school. They had to be in high school to be able to go.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Okay.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: And the trick was -- which is how I got involved in all of this, is that you had to bring a parent. So if -- you had to apply, and if you got selected, you had to bring a parent that was willing to go. And, frankly, I thought I was going to have to arm-wrestle

my husband for the opportunity to go. But it turned out that it just wasn't something he was interested in. He speaks Spanish, and so he feels more compelled to go to a Spanish-speaking county.

And so I was the one that got to go. And I have to say, it was something that I always wanted to do but I never would have actually taken the jump until the kids were out of the house and college was paid for. So --

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Right. Yeah. I understand that phenomenon.

Now, had you ever been to Africa before?

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: No.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Okay. Let's talk -- how many students and parents went on this trip?

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: I want to say about seven parent -- or seven students, which means a couple kids were over eighteen. So I think about -- I think we had a group of thirteen.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: So thirteen total. So you had seven students.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: Thirteen, and then I think we had two administrators with us, so about fifteen folks.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: So seven students, maybe six parents and some administrators. Well, that would take some planning and some organization for a group that big. I mean, it's hard enough for two people to get on a plane and go overseas, but for a group that size that takes some work.

Was it easy to get to your location, or did that take some work?

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: So we ended up being -- in addition to all the shots -- you have to get a lot of shots to go over there.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Well, let's stop and talk about that for a minute. So you don't like shots. So what -- tell me a little bit about the shots that you have -- I guess, probably an anti-malaria shot.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: Well, actually, the malaria, you take as a medication while you're there.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Okay.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: So we had to get typhoid, which turned out to be pretty hard to find, so that was kind of tricky. At the time, there was a shortage. You had to do your hepatitis shots, your tetanus shots. And I know I'm forgetting some others.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: There's -- yeah. There's a couple more. We had to take a lot.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And so -- and that's probably shots over an expanded -- do you do them all at once or do you do them, you know, sort of now and then come back for -- another week?

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: I think some of them we actually got before. I -- they told me that I had to take the tetanus shot, or whatever, and I was really scared about that. But then I remembered I took it a couple years ago, so I was like, oh, no, I got out of one shot.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Good with that. All right. Okay. So you take shots and --

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: That's great.

And you did too, I presume?

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: I did.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And then tell me about your trip to -- from Orlando to -- well, I don't know what your first destination was, but give us the route to Kenya.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: We had about, I want to say, 20, 22 hours of travel. We first flew from -- we rode with Emirates from Orlando to Dubai, and we had a layover in Dubai for about, like, four hours.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Did you get out at all for that, or were you in the airport?

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: No, we were in the airport.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Because I hear Dubai is fascinating.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Yes. Yes. It was very warm; very warm and dry. And it was very interesting, because they actually -- in their airport they don't have any music. It's all just complete silence. And it was just --

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Interesting.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: It was very interesting, because in the United States we have music playing or --

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Everywhere, yeah.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Yes. Yeah. So it was just -- it was a different experience. It was very interesting.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: So there for four hours, then where'd you go?

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Yes. So from that we went from Dubai to Nairobi, and that was about a five-hour flight, so --

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: All right. And then -- and Nairobi is in Kenya?

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: It is, yes.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Right. And then to Naivasha. Is that far from Nairobi? Is it a long drive? Is it --

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: It's about two hours away. I think it's the equivalent from Orlando to Kissimmee, I believe.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Well, that's -- that is only a two-hour drive because of I-4.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: Well -- and your point is well taken, because their roads are not the same as our roads.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Oh, that's right. That's right.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: So a drive that might only take 45 minutes here takes two to three hours there.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Okay. So what are your first impressions? You arrive, this is a place you've wanted to go to since the time you were six or seven.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: I remember being just very overwhelmed. I didn't get really a sufficient amount of sleep on the plane ride there because there were so many people on the plane from Orlando to Dubai. And thankfully the Nairobi to -- or Dubai to Nairobi was not as crowded. But I just remember getting into the hotel room and just being very thankful that there was a bed that I could just crash on.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: I gotcha. All right. So that's a common overseas experience.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: I gotcha. So you're wiped out. But -- so -- well, once you kind of got your energy level back up, tell me one or two first impressions.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Well, actually, the first morning that we were officially in Kenya for a full day, we were able to visit the baby elephant orphanage in Nairobi.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: That's interesting.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: And that was just -- that was incredible to see. And I've actually -- I didn't realize it till later, but I saw, like, a short little spot feature, I think from a news company, online where they actually recorded footage from the baby elephant orphanage. And when I saw it again months later, I was like, oh, I've been there; I was actually there. So I loved that.

But when we were actually driving into Naivasha, it's a metropolitan town, and it's dispersed. It has different neighborhoods and everything. And when we were in Nairobi, it was very dusty and it was very dry. But the closer we got into Naivasha -- it's actually in the Great Rift Valley, which they believe is actually where Adam and Eve and where, I guess, humans were really originated from. So -- and you go in and it's like all this dusty dry area, and then you go in and it's just this beautiful lush valley.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Really. Green?

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: And it's green everything. And there's still, like, clay and dirt on the ground and everything, so it's just the contrast. And the sky is just so crystal clear blue. It was just -- it was gorgeous.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: That sounds spectacular.

All right. So you arrived. What are your accommodations like?

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: Our accommodations were lovely.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Okay.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: And that, in part, was part of the experience that kind of tugs at your heart. Because to get to where we're staying, you go up a hill, through a downtown -- what we would call a small downtown area.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: All right.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: As you're at the bottom of the hill, to your left, you see what we call neighborhoods. But for folks who aren't associated with the program, you'd probably just call it a slum. It's a series of ten structures attached to each other and -- that are very small; smaller -- you know, small about the size of an American bedroom, where an entire family may live.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Gotcha.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: And so you drive past that, to your left, you go through a downtown area that's unlike, you know, any downtown area that you would see in Central Florida, and then you go up the hill to this beautiful, very nice -- especially by the standards of that particular town, a very nice little resort up on the hills.

But there's a lot of security. You go through a couple gate guards, there are security guards. And it's by no means what we would call by our -- you know, a Ritz-Carlton, but it was a very nice accommodation.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Right. Comparatively, pretty nice accommodations.

Okay. So you're there. Tell me about your involvement in the humanitarian mission.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: So each of the students had a different job. Because we didn't really have a lot of Wi-Fi, someone would be the social media person and they would record stuff every day and then they would put it online once we had access to Wi-Fi. There were a couple people that would take just pictures of some of the students and everything. But I

was the videographer, because we were already planning on creating a film -- that I know we'll get to later, but -- because I already knew that this was something that I wanted to do. My one job was just to have my camera equipment ready to go, and my tripod, and just be able to set up whenever and just record stuff that I felt needed to be captured, because some of the stuff there was just -- it was incredible, so --

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Tell me, and this is for either one of you, sort of the purpose or goals of the mission. I mean, the trip wasn't just to go and record people living.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: You were there with a purpose, and I'm sure our listeners are interested in what -- Inua?

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: Um-hum. Inua targets --

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Inua. Inua, not innua (phonetic). Inua.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: Inua.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Okay. Sorry.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: Inua targets young adults ages 16 through 23 who are vulnerable. And by vulnerable, that means they're orphaned, they've lost both their parents, or they're living with a grandparent who really can't provide for them, or they're head of household for their siblings. And as you'll see in the video, one of the speakers, David Miller, says, it's just them. And they're taking care of themselves or they're oftentimes taking care of siblings, which in Kenya doesn't mean just feeding their siblings and housing their siblings, it means paying for their education, because education is not free in Kenya; you have to pay for it.

So the program takes -- identifies these youth. They're identified through what they call Chiefs, and that's their equivalent of a neighborhood mayor. So the local leaders work with our

group to identify kids that they think would benefit from the program and are good candidates for the program.

It's a three-year program. The first year is hope restoration, so they work with a social worker. And they work on basic communication skills, they work on life management skills, they work on basic hygiene skills. Some of these kids don't know about the importance of having clean water and how to get clean water and -- so that they keep from getting sick.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Right.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: They teach them how to better take care of their siblings and how better take care of themselves. And a lot of it, believe it or not, is that communication element. Learning how to talk to another person, learning how to make eye contact. Because when you've suffered trauma like that, just standing up and saying your name is an accomplishment. So they spend the first year doing that. And they work within their neighborhood groups so that they're working together; the kids are working together and supporting each other.

The second year of the program is a skill -- is a business skills training program. So they pick a business that they're passionate about and they think they can support themselves and their family with. So that may be hairdressing, it may be a mechanic, it may be agriculture, or husbandry, some type of farming with animals. And so they pick that as their trade that they're going to learn.

And then the third year of the program is business management. And they learn how to start their own business. And so by the time they graduate from the program, they are -- they have become community leaders at a young age in their own neighborhoods.

And so what's exciting about the program is it doesn't just lift up the student that we're working with, the young adult that we're working with; it doesn't just lift up the siblings. It lifts up an entire neighborhood.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Yeah, that's wonderful.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: Because the kids that they know, their friends, start seeing the changes that they're making and the difference -- the positive difference that it's making in their life, and they want to emulate it. And so they end up mentoring and teaching other kids.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: That's great. About how many students, for want of a better word, in year one, two or three?

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: So there are 300 students in the program. And unlike what we would think traditionally as lawyers, law school, three-year program, you have, you know, year one -- you know, you always have a continuous group of students coming in. Because they want to be targeted and effective with these students, they only work with one group at a time. So it's just one class at one time. So all three years you're with the same class, and there isn't another incoming class until those three years are done.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Oh, okay. So year one, let's say -- how many people did you say; about --

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: About 200 students are in the program.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: -- 200 in year one, 200 in year two, 200 in year three.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: It's the same kids.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Then a whole new --

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: Um-hum. Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Okay. Interesting. So did you become involved in each year or a particular year, your involvement with --

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: So when we came and visited, we were there for the beginning of year three, mid of year three, because they'll be graduating and we all want to go to the graduation ceremony. And the graduation ceremony is in September.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And you're hands-on in part of this -- and do you all run this program or is it run there and you come and participate and leave?

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Because you weren't there for a whole year, of course.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: It's yes to both --

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Okay.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: -- in that the program is a partnership through our church in Winter Park and the church in Naivasha. And so they're working together on --

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: I see.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: And there are actually professors from Rollins that go over and work with the kids. We've had business executives come over and help them with business management and skills. So it's a really diverse group. Nurses go over to teach.

But here's what I didn't understand before I got there.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Okay.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: Because, you know, being a judge and working as a lawyer, you're a doer. You want to sit there, you want to get your hands dirty; fine. Build -- put on the roof --

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Right.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: -- sweep the floor, you want to serve the meals, you want to be a doer. And when you go over as part of this group, you're -- it's a presence that you're offering, it's not a doing.

And let me explain why that's important. So we went to our first meeting with the kids, and there are about 50, 75 kids there. And the social worker, after introductions were done, turns to the children who were sitting across from us and says, raise your hand if your mother and father have come to -- visited you. And many of these children don't have mothers and fathers, so nobody raised their hands.

Raise your hand if you've had a grandparent come and visit you. Again, nobody raised their hand. An aunty, an uncle, a cousin has come to visit you, raise your hand. None of them raised their hand. Except one kid raised his hand, but his friends turned and laughed at him because they knew he was just making it up.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Making it up. Wow.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: And then she turned and she looked at us and she said, this is your family. They love you so much they're willing to come from Orlando, Florida to see you.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: To visit -- wow.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: And that's empowering for people who don't have a support structure by family or who don't have love in their life to know that there are people, even on the other side of the world, that care about them getting up in the morning and them going to work and them doing well -- is really powerful. And I never understood that until that moment.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: What, if any, impact did the fact that you are in a particular racial group and the country you visited is a different racial group have? In other words, there's some obvious differences.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: Sure.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: We're Caucasian. I'm sure you were dealing with Africans. Not African-Americans; Africans. What -- how -- was there a sense of racial separation? Was it a sense of integration? After a while, did it all melt away? I'm just curious what that was -- and I'm curious about both of your feelings about that.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: Well, I -- it was obvious. The entire time we were in Naivasha, the only other time I saw people that looked like us, I think there were two, and we were there for ten days -- eight days.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Right.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: So, yes, it -- yes, we stood out. Anywhere we went, we stood out.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Sure. Right.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: We were pretty obvious. But I think what was amazing was the connection, especially between the youth. Our youth and their youth immediately -- as soon as the meetings were over, they were immediately going over and talking to each other and interacting and talking about things that kids talk about; talking about soccer, talking about their phones. Believe it or not, a lot of the kids have phones --

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Okay.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: -- but they can't afford minutes. So they'll just have, like, a used phone that they'll take pictures on, and when they can afford minutes to share it they'll get on the internet and share it.

But Ella Grace had a very unique experience because of her hair. You can't see on the podcast, but she has very long hair.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Yeah, I was going to talk about that in a second. So for our -- so let's talk about this for just a moment. So for our listeners, Judge Rodriguez is blonde haired and blue eyed.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: Green, but close. Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Green eyed. Sorry. I'm just looking across the table. And Ella Grace is a brunette with -- and brown eyes, I --

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: Um-hum. She has her father's coloring.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: By the way, both mother and daughter are beautiful. I'll just throw that out there.

But -- and I'm going to -- give me a little leeway to lead into this. I have nephews -- I have a nephew who's 12, he's 6'3", he went to China. When he was in China, everywhere he went, crowds followed him. They thought he was a basketball player. But his height was dramatically different than the average height in China.

And then I have another nephew who's very, almost, Scandinavian. He's blond hair -- he's more -- almost has white hair. And he went to a country that was predominately African, and he had crowds following him because he just stood out because he was so white.

And so you have this beautiful brunette hair, brown eyes. Obviously both you and your mom are Caucasian. In this country, what was the reaction?

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Well, actually --

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And long -- I should say, long brunette hair; long straight brunette hair, may be a description.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Yes. Yes. Actually, it was funny when people would come and pet my hair.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Pet your hair. Okay.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: They would walk up to me and they would just -- they would stroke it. And actually what a lot of the kids thought is that everyone has hair color as dark as mine, as dark brown as mine. But people just -- they either wear wigs or they just put different dyes in their hair to make it blonde or red or anything.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: Yeah. So Ella Grace was the only woman on the trip that had brown hair, believe it or not.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Oh, I see.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: And so they thought that she was the only one that had real hair. She [sic] thought the rest of us were wearing wigs or that our hair had been dyed. And there is this one adorable picture I have where she is just surrounded by school children, and I think six of them each have a strand of her hair in their -- she was very patient with them.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Adorable.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: Because it was just a delight to them to touch her hair.

And the other thing I noticed when we were walking, walking through the streets, even coming up to people we didn't know, especially the children, they just wanted to touch our hands because they had never seen skin that looks like ours.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Light skin.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: And so they wanted to know if it felt the same, which was really interesting.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: That's fascinating.

Would you describe where you were as immersed in poverty? Is it a poor -- is the village or the -- is Naivasha poor by American standards?

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: I would say yes. But poor in the sense of a lack of material value. The -- when you -- immediately when you walk into a village or a neighborhood, you feel so welcomed. People come up out of their homes to meet you. They want to show you their home, even though we're really not really comfortable or allowed to do that. But just the amount of joy and love that everyone has in that vicinity, it's just -- it overpowers the idea of, I guess, material goods. I wouldn't really call Naivasha poor in that sense. I would just --

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Just sort of resource depleted?

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: So my wife went on a trip to India with a group. It was sort of somewhat work related. But she said the thing that struck her is you cannot imagine this kind of poverty that you saw in India. And when you think about America and poverty, some of folks here would not -- you know, in that culture, you know, would feel -- they wouldn't feel impoverished, because it's just people without homes, without running water, begging for meals, every now and then maybe able to cook a meal, really don't possess any consumer goods at all. Cloth -- the clothes they have and not much more. And so she said that was dramatic. And maybe that's not what you encountered in Naivasha. But I'm just curious.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Well, it was almost like that. When we would meet the youth in the groups and everything, they would be wearing their Sunday best. And it wouldn't -- their clothing and attire wouldn't appear as if they were coming from situations and really almost shacks, almost, just these tent areas.

And actually that happened -- we met one student, Rose, and I got to meet her and get to know her. And she had a beautiful yellow dress on, and a black blazer. And she was like, oh, like, I'll show you to my home. So we drove to her house, and it was completely different than

what I would have expected. It was one room. There were tapestries everywhere. There was a kitchen in the corner, and couches in the other one. And then you had to go down a specific alleyway to find, like, her laundry room or so, and where the restrooms, I guess, would eventually be. We didn't get to look at that. But I just -- I would have had no idea.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: And the laundry room was not a washer and dryer.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: No.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: It was a --

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Tub.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: It was a tub.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: It was a metal -- yeah.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: So, yeah. And, you know, the kids we're working with, when they start off the program, one percent of them have access to clean water. And by the time they graduate, we're at a hundred percent.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And how is that? Because -- what skill set do they learn to come up with clean water? I mean, is clean water available, or is --

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: Boiling.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Oh, I see.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: Boiling water or obtaining -- there was a group from Kohler that came after us and brought in a bunch of water purifiers to --

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: I see. Okay. So the water is available, but purifying it, making sure that it's clean, that's the challenge; not finding water?

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: Right. It's making sure that it's clean water for them to be able to drink.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: All right. So you're there for, did you say earlier, ten days?

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: It was ten days including travel, so we were probably on, you know --

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: We were there for over a week, I think -- over a week.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: So, Ella Grace, how did this trip change you?

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Well, when we arrived to Naivasha, and the first day we were there and getting to know the youth, I remember just being constantly worried about where am I going to be going to bed next; what am I going to be eating next; will I like the food next; what should I be wearing that's, you know, reflective of American lifestyle but also just respectful in general of their culture as well; how should I act around them; will they understand me. So that was really all the worries that were going around in my head.

And it wasn't until the second day that we visited a slum, and just a neighborhood in general, that I began to feel extremely overwhelmed. I just -- I remember having this -- it just -- it all came crashing down on me, this just feeling where, oh, my gosh, I am in Kenya and I am meeting these people that are so excited to see me; and I have so much stuff, and I really don't need this much stuff. These people are so happy with so -- like so many little possessions. And after that, my mom can tell you, I just -- once we went back into the room that night, I just broke down crying because I couldn't believe just the things that I saw. Because it is extreme poverty.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Yeah. We're such a consumer-driven country. Until you get that comparison sometimes, you can't even understand it, I would think.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Absolutely. Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: All right. So that happened. What else? Anything else that sort of -- did it whet your appetite for travel across the world?

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: It did. It did. I've always -- I love travel. We -- my -- I think my first realization of wanting to travel was when we drove all the way out to the Grand Canyon in 2013. I just remember just absolutely loving that.

But it -- definitely the flight was a different experience. I've never been on a 14 or 15-hour flight before, so that was definitely something. Just -- I loved being immersed. I have been on trips before where you sightsee and you get to visit museums, but I've never been so involved in a culture, in a group of people that way before.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: So will you go back there specifically, do you think, or is this sort of a once-in-a-lifetime trip? I'm curious.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: What's missing is the eye contact, as she's looking at me going -- saying, please, say yes that I can go again.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Right. Well, would you like to go back -- specifically go back there?

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: I would love to go back again. I would love to -- yes, absolutely. The youth there are just incredible. And actually --

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Feel like you left friends behind?

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: I do. I do. I absolutely do.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Do you communicate with them? Can you communicate with them?

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: So we're not allowed to have social media requests on them because that creates a direct relationship with the person rather than a relationship with the organization and the leaders there. But actually, I -- the first group that we met, I met a young woman about 18, and her name was Teresia (phonetic), and she had a little, like, two-year-old.

And I was in her group, her little small group, and we were talking. And I had an empty seat next to me. And she looks at me, and I look at her, and she's on the opposite side of the small group circle, and she -- all of the sudden without, like, further warning, she comes over and she sits next to me and she's like, hello; I am Teresia and I want you to hold my baby. And I was like, what -- and I have never held a baby in Kenya before, until this point.

And I was like, okay. And I'm holding this little, tiny child, and he's just looking at me like, you look kind of different, but okay. His eyes just got so wide because I don't think he ever saw a person with my skin color, a light skin tone, before. And so I got to know her very well for the next, I would say, hour, hour-and-a-half. And I just found out recently, actually, that her prayer partner -- actually in her letter told her prayer partner to tell me to say -- that she says hello and that she's doing well. So --

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Was there a language barrier? It sounds like there was some communication.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: These kids are very bright. They speak often three languages. They speak their native tribal language, they speak Swahili, and they speak English.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Wow. That's pretty amazing.

You mentioned it once, and then I want to get to your film. So what was food like over there? What was the food experience?

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: So I'm a naturally -- I'm a very picky eater, unfortunately.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Okay.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: So I -- the food was definitely one of the biggest worries on my list. And I will tell you the Dubai French fries and the ketchup, it's very weird. It's not something that -- it's -- I don't know what it was, but it was something unique.

But in Naivasha, I just -- I absolutely loved the food. There -- I always found something that I really enjoyed eating, whether that was at the resort or -- we even visited one of the Panua graduate's café that she's really built from the ground up. And that was by far some of the best food.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: So tell me a little bit about the food, though. So I like Ethiopian food. I don't know if you've had Ethiopian food. You know, it's lamb and it's a lot of vegetables and the bread, which has a particular name and I'm drawing a blank. I'll think of it in a minute. There are utensils. You eat out of -- generally out of a basket. It's very communal. And it's -- and -- but the spices and the sauces are unbelievable. They're fabulous.

So I don't -- what kind of -- I'm kind of curious what kind of food. Served on plates with utensils, was it communal?

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: It was always very nice. Whenever we ate, even at the graduate's restaurant, which was in the middle of one of the neighborhoods, or even at the church picnic or --

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: But did you go into a -- maybe you didn't do this because of something you said earlier, but were you ever in a home and say, we want to serve you a meal, sort of what we would eat in our home?

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: No, we didn't.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Didn't have a lot of that. I see.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: We didn't do that.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: I was just curious about that.

Well, let's talk about your film. So you are over there -- I appreciate the three-year segment of the mission, and it sounds fabulous -- and so you were filming what in particular? What were you trying to capture?

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Particularly -- because it's such a precarious balance determining whether if it's appropriate to film some of the situations that the youth are living in and just the overall Naivasha area, because I do want to be respectful of their culture.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Sure. Sure.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: So it was delicate balance. Mainly when I was with the youth, I would interview them and they would really share me their testimony. So I have, like, 20-minute videos of some of these youth talking about their life from, I guess, like a couple years before they would lose their parents, and then they would lose their parents and how they would feel lost for a while, but then they would regain their faith and their comfort and confidence by joining Inua.

I would say it was powerful. It was really powerful.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: So orphan children, is that common, uncommon? Is there a particular reason that there are so many orphan children? Is it disease, is it war, is it --

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: There's about 25,000 orphaned youth in Naivasha, ranging from --

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Just in Naivasha?

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Just in Naivasha. There's --

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And why? Is there a common cause for that? Is it --

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: There are a variety of reasons. Some of them might be economic, some of them might be due to the AIDS epidemic.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Which is big in Africa.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: Which is a problem. And it's just the situation that they're in.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Well, you know, depending on your culture, lifespan might be a lot shorter if you don't have the kind of medical treatment that expands your life, so that something that would be controllable here, an injury, might be fatal in a particular culture. I guess there's all kinds of reasons.

I didn't realize. That's a lot of orphan children, 25,000. That's a -- that's quite something.

Well, I asked you, so let me ask your mom. How did this trip change your life, or did it change your life?

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: Well, my job on the trip was to carry Ella Grace's camera bag. So it was a good lesson in humility, and she certainly enjoyed having an assistant that she could tell what to do. But she was very nice. She's a good boss. And so I think that opportunity to serve my child in pursuing her passion and her dream, just as a parent, that was rewarding.

But as a judge, it was a really eye-opening experience as to what is possible. So when I had my first trial, it was a -- I had a murder trial when I started on the bench in 2012. And I called Judge Perry, our chief judge at the time, after the trial, because we went late and, you know, I had to call him and let him know what happened, and he said something to me that I'll never forget. He said, Heather, you will find in this job that people come to you for one of the following three reasons; a lack of love, a lack of education, or a perceived lack of opportunity.

And what I saw the Inua program do is meet all of those needs. They provide the kids with love, they provide them with education, and they provide them with an opportunity. And these are kids that the mayors, for lack of a better word, you know, the mayors of their village, their town, have -- or neighborhood have identified. These -- and they're really street kids. And it's to help them avoid falling into a cycle of addiction or selling drugs, because that happens in Naivasha just like it happens here in Orange and Osceola County, and to help these kids find another way.

And what's exciting is how it just lifts up an entire community, the impact that that makes. And what's exciting is we've tried the prototype in Naivasha, we've tried this, and we have a system that's proven to work. What if we brought that back to our community? What if we started really investing in our kids and investing in what matters, which starts with giving them value?

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Right.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: I just thought that was really powerful as a juvenile -- as a judge.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: That's great. That's fabulous.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: And then what was fun as a juvenile judge -- and fun I guess I just use as a way -- it was kind of cute the way they did it. Under -- it was explained to me by one of the executives for the program that under Kenyan law, children do not break the law because they're too young to know what it is.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Up to what age is that?

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: And so -- he didn't offer that information.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Right.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: But what he said is that under Kenyan law, children are considered to be in conflict with the law, which I thought was an interesting way to describe conflict with the law.

But if you think about it, it does go along with our jurisprudence and our philosophy in that we do treat juveniles different than adults. We understand that their minds are not fully developed, that they're still trying to understand consequences. And that's why there's different penalties for juveniles as opposed to adults.

And as a Family Law judge, it really impacted me because you're changing a family tree.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Yeah, that's great.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: You are changing the course of history for that family. For Rose, that she talked about -- Rose is a graduate of the program. She's a hairdresser. She has her own salon and she has a baby girl named Daisy. And Daisy's life is going to be completely different than Rose's. And Daisy's children are going to take everything that Rose has taught her, and Daisy's going to know even more and teach her kids. And so you're changing the direction and legacy of an entire family tree, and that's pretty exciting.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: That's very good. That's great.

All right. You pick. Tell me either the story of the hummingbird or the story of the elephant. I'm going to let Ella Grace pick.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Well -- okay. So there was a Kenyan children's story that we heard on our first day, and they called it the story of the hummingbird, and the story went like this.

There was a great wildfire in the forest, and all of the animals fled. The zebras, the lions, the tigers, the giraffes, all of them left and they went to search higher ground. And all the

animals can talk in this story, of course. And they noticed that one of the animals wasn't there. And they were like, oh, where's the hummingbird. And they were looking frantically for the hummingbird.

And they noticed that down below, the hummingbird was using its tiny beak to get a little bit of water just from the river, to scoop it up, and then throw it back over the wildfire just to try and tame it just a little bit. And it was just -- but the way he flapped and everything, it wasn't really much of a difference.

And so some of the animals mocked at him and they were like, well, why are you doing that; you're so tiny and the fire is so big; there is absolutely nothing that you can possibly do. And so the hummingbird, without missing a beat, turned to the animals and said, I am doing the best I can.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: That's great.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: So from that, all the animals, once they hear that they're like, well, I guess we can do that too. So the other animals contributed and did their part, and even the elephant with its giant trunk was able to fill a bunch of water, and help eventually eliminate the wildfire.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Fabulous. Well, how -- what a beautiful story. So, Ella Grace, to me you're the representative of that hummingbird. You went over to this country you've never been before --

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: -- spent ten days of your time and your -- giving your spirit and your energy and your intellect to touch people's lives, and I'm sure it will have an impact

like that hummingbird did. It might not seem like a lot, but I'm sure it changed their lives forever. Judge Rodriguez, you also. So I'm so impressed.

So, Ella Grace, I want to end this by asking this. So what grade did you say -- you're a junior?

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: I'm a junior, yes.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Where do you go to school?

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: I go to a public high school in Orange County.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And where would you like to go to college and what would you like to study?

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Oh, my goodness.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Or don't you know yet?

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Well, both of my parents went to FSU, so I'm definitely --

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: So you're getting real pressure from --

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: I am definitely looking at Florida State. I've also been looking at a couple of really top communications schools, such as USC, Syracuse, Columbia and UNC, so --

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Well, best of luck.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Thank you.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And communications, obviously, is what you want to study with --

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: I would love -- my --

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: -- kind of direction; documentary films or films, or what?

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: I would love to do documentarian style work. I would love to be the video producer of a national or international media organization. But I would also really love to be able to just be that one person that was like the screenwriter for the movie that was based on the true story. So that is my ultimate goal. So --

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: Well, best of luck. I -- my sense is you're going to succeed at whatever you put your mind to.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Thank you. Thank you.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: You know, I wish our readers could actually see you, because listening to you, I think they're going to have an image of a -- you know, someone in their late 20s, early 30s because -- but you're this high school student who is unbelievably articulate and thoughtful and smart and loving, from what I can tell from this.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Thank you.

CHIEF JUDGE LAUTEN: And I'm sure that trait you inherited in part from your mom and dad, whom I know and think the world of.

So thanks for taking time out of both of your schedules and joining us. This is fascinating.

I love the impact that it had there, and really that you carried some of what you did there back to this community, Judge Rodriguez. And I thought that was very thoughtful what you said about how some effort can change people's lives for generations. I hope we get to do that in the court system, at times.

And thank you both for being with me. I really enjoyed it. Thanks.

JUDGE RODRIGUEZ: Thank you.

ELLA GRACE RODRIGUEZ: Thank you very much.

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