

Diversity Dialogues: Oman Cumberbatch

John Caher: Welcome to Amici, News and Insight from the New York courts. I'm John Caher. For today's Diversity Dialogue program, we're pleased to feature Omar Cumberbatch, health coach, reformed sugar addict, radio talk show host and deputy district executive for the 9th Judicial District, which includes Dutchess, Orange, Putnam, Rockland and Westchester Counties.

Omar, thanks for joining us today. This is kind of a first for me. We've got an amateur pod co-host—me interviewing a professional talk show host— you. So I may need you to bail me out at some point. But let's get started, and let's start at the beginning. Tell me about your roots if you would.

Omar Cumberbatch: Absolutely. But John, I'm sure you're giving yourself a little less credit. I know that you're pretty good at this, so it's all good. But I'll absolutely help you out as much as I can.

John Caher: Well, thank you.

Omar Cumberbatch: Sure. My roots really go back as my mom, who was actually born and raised in Jamaica. She came to the US when she was a teenager. My father family is from Barbados, but he was actually born in Queens. I grew up in Queens as well, Long Island City, specifically. And I moved to White Plains about, oh man, it's going on 20 something years, and I've been here ever since. I really enjoy the City of White Plains. It's in Westchester County. I think I'll be here for a while. I really enjoyed being here.

John Caher: Oh, that's good to hear. Now, who were your primary mentors or role models growing up?

Omar Cumberbatch: Well, for me growing up, I was just a super sports fans, a big Mets fan, a big Knicks fan. So a lot of my early mentors or people who I looked up to, I should say more so people I looked up to were obviously like Michael Jordan, Darryl Strawberry. Those guys are really people who I really admired.

But as I got older a guy named Sean Croxton, and I know many of the listeners aren't going to know who Sean Croxton is, but he was actually one of the big health and wellness podcasters. And one of the things that I really admired about him is I'm an avid reader, I really love reading, and I love health and wellness, which I'm sure we're going to get into a little bit in this show. He was somebody who I was really impressed by. He had

guests on his show on books that he read. And he would have Q and A's with them, and really just pick their brain after he read the book. And it was really something that I was fascinated with. And I really loved what he was doing out there. And he actually became a mentor and a friend. After some time down the road, I actually met him and did some work with him, and it was really a nice experience. So, definitely Sean Croxton in my later years.

John Caher: Great. I do want to get into your health coaching a little bit later. But on your webpage, you say, and I quote, "I always wanted a big brother. Being the oldest, I had to learn most things the hard way." What do you mean?

Omar Cumberbatch: Life is too short to learn every single lesson on your own and make every single mistake. So to have somebody there to kind of guide you in those kinds of things. I was always very jealous of my little brother when it comes to those things and it was ironic because my brother was completely opposite from me. And even if you told him not to touch something, he still touched it. He's one of those guys.

But I just felt that I would have benefited a lot if I had those opportunities to have someone who's actually been through it a little bit, that I can gain some wisdom and I'm very open to knowledge. And that's why one of the things that I'm very passionate about, too, is mentorship and just kind of just making myself available for people to pick my brain about a variety of topics—health, wellness, the court system, anything that I think that someone can learn off my experiences. I'm very much an open book when it comes to that. And I really relish the opportunity to share that knowledge and push it forward.

John Caher: So it sounds like you're still the "big brother."

Omar Cumberbatch: Yup, absolutely!

John Caher: And where did you go to school?

Omar Cumberbatch: I went to SUNY Albany. I finished my bachelor degree in SUNY Purchase, though. So I was in Albany for two years and then I wrapped it up down here in SUNY Purchase. And that's actually in Westchester County as well.

John Caher: What did you study?

Omar Cumberbatch: In Albany, I started with the communications degree and then when I finished in Purchase, it ended up being the equivalent to a liberal arts

degree because I went to school at night. I actually started in the courts at that time. And I wasn't in love with SUNY Albany; I'm sure we have a lot of people who might be listening to the show who actually went to SUNY Albany, so I don't mean to disrespect that I was up there. I just didn't have necessarily anything that made me stay knowing that I was going to get an opportunity in the court system at that age and was able to actually go to school at night. So I just finished the degree. I kind of kill two birds with one stone. And I wrapped it up there. So it was the equivalent of a liberal arts degree because I was doing my schooling at night.

John Caher: A lot of people when they're in school work at McDonald's or Burger King or something like that. How did you end up in the court system?

Omar Cumberbatch: Oh, it's a family business. My father, he was in the court system. When I was in high school, he made me take a Grade 8 test. And I had no idea what I was doing. It was a weekend, it was a Saturday when they used to give the test. I think it was in Yonkers at the time. I had no idea what I was doing. He just said, "Go take this test." I went and took his test. And that was kind of it. And then I got my results from the test two years later. So that tells you a little bit about how well I did on the test. It was probably not that great. So I just had the opportunity at that point, when they canvassed me, and it was just an opportunity. But my father was the one who actually made me take the test, and he was somebody who was influential in guiding me in the court system about those types of opportunities.

John Caher: What did your father do? Or what does he do?

Omar Cumberbatch: Oh, well, he's retired now. But he was a senior court clerk and I think he eventually became an associate court clerk. He retired as an associate court clerk. He worked at 60 Centre Street for many years. And then he actually ended his career close to home, which was in White Plains Supreme Court.

John Caher: Right. And you said it's a family business. Do you have other family members in the courts?

Omar Cumberbatch: Oh, yeah! Well, my mother retired, but she was in the court. My brother is in the court system. My sister was in the court system. We all kind of had that guidance to take the civil service exams. And it was just really an open door opportunity for us. And we all had had some roots in the system at some time. And again, had very good opportunities through taking the test and stuff like that.

John Caher: Now, you're the deputy district executive. What does the deputy district executive do?

Omar Cumberbatch: That's a great question because I had no idea before I started in this capacity. I work for the Administrative Judge, and in the Administrative judge's office what we do is we oversee all the administration functions of court operations. So, we do budget, HR, facility stuff, timekeeping functions, and we're really there just to support the operations of the court. We're not in the trenches with the actual courts, but we do support them with anything that's an administrative function. My boss is the district executive. And we work closely with the Administrative Judge specifically, and really liaison between the DCAJ's office and the folks in OCA.

John Caher: I see. Now, 9th JD is kind of an interesting creature in my mind. From where I sit, it's downstate. People in New York City think it's upstate. But anyway you look at it, it's a very, very big district, a very populous district. So what are the challenges that are specific to that geographic region?

Omar Cumberbatch: It is a very interesting part of the state, like you said. When I moved from Queens up to White Plains, I thought White Plains was by Albany. It's actually right outside the Bronx!

I think the elephant in the room for every district is basically what we're dealing with in the COVID crisis and staying afloat, while managing day-to-day operations with such minimal staff and shifting of staff and whatnot.

And to your point, geographically, we do have some huge cities in Yonkers and Mount Vernon, New Rochelle. And we do have rural or smaller areas in Putnam County, the Carmel region and Port Jervis, which is really almost two hours away from White Plains. So we do have a very different landscape in comparison to a lot of other territories in the state. And like you said, we're very big. It's a populous territory. And a lot of different things are going on. A lot of different needs that we have to address throughout the actual district, so those are the challenges that we have to deal with on a regular basis.

John Caher: Well, it's also I think, a rather diverse county in a lot of ways. You've got White Plains, which has all the problems of all the urban problems you would expect. You've got wealthy, serene suburbs and everything in between.

Omar Cumberbatch: Yeah. For right now, I think the biggest challenge is definitely managing the COVID crisis and staying afloat while managing the day-to-day needs of the court with minimal staff. And I think that's the elephant in the room. And then we do also have very diverse communities that we do serve. We do have big cities obviously, like Yonkers, New Rochelle, White Plains, and a little bit north, Poughkeepsie and then Middletown. There's just a very different type of population for each particular core.

And then we do have super wealthy areas that we do have to service as well. So there's dynamics where we have to deal with people who are not represented by attorneys, pro se litigants and such. And we have to help them navigate the system as well. And then you do have again, the wealthy areas that sometimes have more attorney influences as far as being able to present cases in different fashions. So we do have a very interesting dynamic when it comes to administering justice in the night.

John Caher: Now, you mentioned the elephant in the room. And I think the court system this year had a couple elephants in the room. And one of them, of course, is COVID. But another one of them is the report issued a few months ago by Secretary Jeh Johnson, indicating that the court system is continuing to struggle with the systemic racism that remains in the society. And from what you've seen and experienced, did that report come as a surprise to you?

Omar Cumberbatch: It didn't, honestly. I'm coming up on my 25th year in the system and I've been in so many different capacities and I play so many different roles in the system, from just being a Grade 8 and being in a supervisory position in different courts and family courts, city courts and now in an administrative capacity. It's always been something that's come up in a variety of ways across my career as far as being reported or observing. So it wasn't a surprise, unfortunately. And it is not expected that the court system was going to escape that. So I would have been more surprised if it wasn't something that wasn't found as an issue, to be honest.

John Caher: Now, what can the district executives, the deputy district executives, the administrative judges do on the local or granular level to advance the cause of racial and ethnic fairness in the courts?

Omar Cumberbatch: I think what we can do—especially DEs and Deputy DEs as the top officials of the districts—is to take the position recommended in the Johnson report and really embrace that commitment to diversity, embrace the commitment from the top that we're not going to have any tolerance for a racial bias in any way, and that we continue to charge our

court managers to keep an eye on this and make it a top priority so that we can be diligent in maintaining a culture that is open to diversity.

John Caher: It seems like you have a whole lot on your plate with your day job. But you're also a health coach and a podcast host. How did that happen?

Omar Cumberbatch: Well, it is interesting. I was always passionate about health and wellness. I was just one of those people who would be in the gym working out. I was very passionate about trying to stay in shape. And I just wasn't getting the results that you would figure for someone who's been in the gym and doing this kind of stuff. I did have weight fluctuations, things of that nature. And one day, I really just stumbled upon the detriment of sugar in your diet. And I had tried everything. I was doing a whole bunch of weird diets. I was even a vegetarian for a spell. I'm not saying that's a weird diet, I just put it in the context of where I was at the time.

I stumbled upon something that really just started talking about sugar. And I was like, "You know what? I'm going to try this. I'm going to eliminate sugar." And the results were unbelievable. I've lost so much weight to the point where I remember a buddy, court officer, pulled me to the side and asked if I was okay because of the amount of weight I lost in a pretty rapid amount of time. And I said, "No, I'm fine. I just cut out sugar." And it was one of those things that it was really amazing. And to me, just to think that I can do one change in my diet, and all of these things will fall into place.

And I just got passionate about it. I went to school at night again—I was always doing something outside of work—and I was certified as a health coach with the Institute for Integrative Nutrition. And at that point, I became a health coach. And I was, again, going back to my mentor who I really looked up to and that's how that was born.

John Caher: Now, it sounds like the bottom line message is that you cannot exercise your way out of a poor diet.

Omar Cumberbatch: Oh, absolutely. I always say, "You can't outrun your mouth."

John Caher: That's a good way to put it. And so, with the coaching, what exactly do you do other than say, "Don't eat sugar?"

Omar Cumberbatch: Well, that's like the "go-to" thing. That's the simplest thing to do. But there's so many different avenues to look into as far as your lifestyle. I guess the easiest thing is to really recognize exactly what you're doing

that probably needs to be eliminated right off the bat. So I think that before you can eat *well*, you have to really just not eat *bad*.

We should have some idea that there's certain things in our diets—chips, soda, sugary drinks and stuff like that—that if we can at least get rid of them, we would be better off. If you could just start eliminating some of those things out of your diet, you'll probably be getting a whole lot of results. If want to go further and really transform your life, you can add on to that more specific things. Once we eliminate some of those other things, we'll be able to crowd in newer behaviors that will help us be better off in our health and wellness.

John Caher: What are the benefits of that? Obviously, you're leaner and healthier than you were in your Dunkin' Donut days. But has that made you a better employee, a more productive employee, a more energetic employee?

Omar Cumberbatch: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. Without a doubt, with all the changes that I've been able to go through that were for the better in the health arena, I absolutely have more energy. I absolutely have a better focus. I had a lot of issues with just annoying pain that was really just due to excess weight, to excess sugar intake and excess inflammation that just happened because of the diet and lifestyle choices I was making at the time. Just being and feeling better is absolutely going to make you a more productive employee without a doubt, no doubt about it.

John Caher: And how do you balance those responsibilities? You have a very demanding full-time job, it seems like. It sounds like you have a rather demanding part-time gig is well.

Omar Cumberbatch: The part-time part of it isn't too demanding. It's very much something that I really just enjoy, and it's more of like a passion project. It keeps me grounded and sane as well. It really keeps me continuously learning and continuously engaging with people all over the world, honestly. And it's one of those things that fuels me. Other than that, I'm also a super early riser. I do a lot of stuff crack at dawn, I'm able to knock a lot of this stuff out. I'm a systems guy as well. So a lot of the things that I need to put in place that's just system-oriented as far as getting things done. So it's really not that bad of an issue as far as that goes, for sure.

John Caher: Sounds like you're a result-oriented guy, rather than a process-oriented guy. In other words, you want to get from A to Z.

Omar Cumberbatch: Yeah, I love it. That's definitely the thing that drives me.

John Caher: Let's wrap it up with returning at the court system, if we could.

Omar Cumberbatch: Sure.

John Caher: What is the key to success in the court system, especially for those of minority backgrounds?

Omar Cumberbatch: Family history definitely helped. And in the court system, just like in everywhere else in the world, you need to really establish your reputation. Everybody knows the court system is very, very, very, very small, and your reputation goes a long way. So just try to establish yourself as a hard worker, someone who's eager to learn and show a desire to advance. Because once people recognize that you have an interest in making this a career, advancing and doing a little bit more, opportunities do present themselves, people keep you in the back of their mind.

And then of course, with opportunities, I think that we have to take the approach that we have to keep our eye out on opportunities as well, whether that be like a civil service exam or a posting, you have to put your head in the ring. And also seek out people in a position that you'd like to be in. Seek their advice, see how they got to where they are, and just really pick people's brains. I think the court system is big in the opportunities that it does have, and we just have to start being more aware of these opportunities. And I think the court system has to do a better job as far as getting those opportunities out there.

Even the position I'm in now, I'm so shocked sometimes to see offices that are really, really important. Offices that when I was a Grade 8, I had no idea existed, and there would have been opportunities that I would have had on the radar, but I just didn't know. So kind of get to know where you would like to be. And if the court system can help promoting those entities as well, that's a big deal, too.

John Caher: Well, that's great advice. And thank you, Omar.

Omar Cumberbatch: Anytime. It's an absolute pleasure. Thanks for having me.