



As partnerships go, this one is an objective success.

Seminole Tribal Court and the 17th Judicial Circuit Court of Florida have been working together for a few years now – although the collaboration may be under the radar for most Tribal members.

Some background: Tribal Court consists of an appellate court and a trial court, which has broad civil jurisdiction to hear cases and controversies that end up before it.

The 17th Circuit – specifically the dependency division of its Unified Family Court – has seven circuit court judges and two general magistrates.

Located in downtown Fort Lauderdale, it is one of 20 judicial circuits in the state.

The relationship began after Judge Jose Izquierdo – one of the 17th Circuit judges – met Tribal Court's Chief Justice Willie Johns and Director Stan Wolfe at the 2016 Child Protection Summit in Orlando, a conference sponsored by the Florida Department of Children and Families.

At the time, Izquierdo had been on the job in the dependency division for only a couple months.

It made sense to attend the conference to learn more about dependency issues.

Dependency includes anything to do with children who are abused, abandoned or neglected.



Seventeenth Judicial District of Florida Judge Jose Izquierdo has been assisting the Tribe with adoptions for the past three years. He has held hearings and even a final adoption ceremony at Tribal headquarters in Hollywood. (Photo Damon Scott)

They might be removed from parents for those reasons. Outcomes can result in several scenarios, including reunification with family members or adoption.

Izquierdo went to a presentation at the conference put on by Chief Justice Johns and Director Wolfe that included a discussion on how the Tribe deals with such situations, and how it all fits under the auspices of the Indian Child Welfare Act, or ICWA.

There was a discussion about the hardships Tribal families face in navigating court systems outside the Tribe, and going before judges who aren't familiar with Seminole culture or customs, or provisions of the ICWA.

Izquierdo also learned that it is, simply, logistically hard and often intimidating for Tribal members to make the trek from the Hollywood Reservation to downtown Fort Lauderdale for court appearances.

"I didn't have much in the way of familiarity with those topics yet, other than being aware," Izquierdo said. "It seemed to me like there was a need for something to be done; I just didn't know what it was."

Back in Broward, Izquierdo talked with colleagues about it, including the 17th Circuit's Chief Judge - Jack Tuter - and the Unified Family Court Administrative Judge - Hope Tieman Bristol.

Tuter and Tieman Bristol encouraged his efforts and told him to reach out to the Tribe. So he called Director Wolfe.

"We sat down and I said: 'What can I do?' We generated an idea to have all the Seminole Tribe's [dependency-related] cases go to my division, and I would become educated through the various [Tribal] judges," Izquierdo said.

He began to learn about the Tribe's culture, heritage, and the history of the clan system and its unique matriarchal society.

He learned how Seminoles go about problem solving; how families fit together.

"I think about the culture shock my family went through coming from another country and just not having language, and I think to myself: that's got to be scary," Izquierdo said.

Born and raised in Florida, Izquierdo, 44, is a first generation Cuban American.

His mother was involved in Operation Peter Pan, when 14,000 unaccompanied children were flown to the U.S. from Cuba between 1960 and 1962.

The operation was in part a reaction of opposition to Fidel Castro and the education system.

Izquierdo, who has been practicing law for 17 years, earned his law degree at the Levin College of Law at the University of Florida. He has a 7-year-old daughter.

'Milestone'

The partnership quickly blossomed with a handful of Tribal cases all taking place in Izquierdo's courtroom.

Hearings were soon set up to take place in Tribal Court at Tribal headquarters on the Hollywood Reservation.

"It was a big milestone to be able to sit in the Tribal Court and to have Tribal judges there to be able to address any issues I had. I was able to consult with them and the elders," Izquierdo said.

Izquierdo learned from the judges and they learned from him.

"It gave me an opportunity to understand the massive amounts of knowledge they have. That sharing, that cooperation, is what makes it work," he said.

A second milestone came April 18, 2019. For the first time, a Tribal family adoption was finalized at Tribal headquarters with Izquierdo, Chief Justice Johns and other state and Tribal officials on hand. (Another adoption had previously occurred in Izquierdo's courtroom).

The ceremony also marked a day of celebration for parents Andrea and Joshua Jumper, their family and friends.

The couple officially adopted then 2-year-old Loraine Marie Stewart Jumper.

Moses "Bigg Shot" Jumper Jr., who is an associate justice on the Tribal Court, is also the grandfather. He is the father of Joshua Jumper.

At the time, both Chief Judge Moses B. Osceola and Associate Justice Jumper Jr. underscored the importance of the event.

"We're very thankful that this child can remain with an Indian family. That's the most important thing that has been accomplished today," Chief Judge Osceola said.

"I think it's a good thing that the Seminoles are able to keep the kids that they have for adoption. That's a great thing for the Tribe to do," added Associate Justice Jumper Jr.

While the dependency cases are ultimately decided through the 17th Circuit, eventually it could be transferred exclusively to the Tribe. The scenario is one of the goals of the ICWA statute.

"The Tribe gets to see how a dependency court is run, at least out of Broward, and then as the Tribe develops its procedures in the future for having these courts, they can implement the parts they like and don't like," Izquierdo said.

In other words, the Tribe could reach a point of hearing and deciding the outcome of its own dependency cases.

In the meantime, Izquierdo, who was appointed in 2016 and reelected in 2018 for an additional six year term, said he's still learning and hopes he's still providing valuable information as well.

"The Tribe has been a dream partner to work with," he said.

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