

Polk Sheriff Judd: Trip to border with DeSantis offered education on immigration 'crisis'

Gary White

June 8, 2023

When Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis made a surprise trip to Arizona on Wednesday to criticize federal immigration policies, he took two law-enforcement officials from Florida along with him.

One was Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd.

Judd, a close ally of DeSantis and a frequent critic of President Joe Biden's approach toward controlling illegal immigration, rewarded the governor with effusive words. Judd joined Florida Attorney General Ashley Moody, Brevard County Sheriff Wayne Ivey and sheriffs from Arizona, Idaho and Texas in speaking at a roundtable event Wednesday afternoon in Sierra Vista, Arizona.

Judd opened by saying that he entered law enforcement at age 18 and has worked in the field for decades, the past 19 as sheriff in Polk County.

"And I've worked for a lot of governors," Judd said. "Ladies and gentlemen, make no mistake about it. This is simply the best governor that the state of Florida has had in the last 50 years."

DeSantis launched his long-awaited run for president two weeks ago, and he has made harsh assessments of Biden and his policies a central element of his campaign. Though Wednesday's trip was billed as an official governmental action and not a campaign event, Judd came close to offering an implicit endorsement of DeSantis.

"Once again, I've seen lots of governors," Judd said. "I've seen lots of presidents. I've seen a lot of leaders. I've never seen the leader of the quality of Ron DeSantis, our governor, who makes things happen, and his sole focus is protecting and serving the people and keeping them safe. And Florida is the example. When people are safe, and they feel safe, they thrive. And our great state does tremendous. But we need to do that all across the United States of America."

'We're all border counties'

Judd joined other law-enforcement leaders in saying that illegal crossings at the southern border affect communities throughout the country.

"When you said we're all border counties — we're all border counties," Judd said, repeating a phrase spoken by one of the other sheriffs.

Judd gave examples of crimes he said have been committed in Polk County by illegal immigrants. He mentioned a February undercover operation in which the Polk County Sheriff's Office and other agencies made 213 arrests related to prostitution and solicitation.

PCSO has previously reported that 24 of the 113 people arrested on prostitution charges may have been victims of human trafficking. At Wednesday's event, Judd said that the group included women from Cuba who had been illegally smuggled over the border from Mexico and then forced into sex work in Florida to repay their smugglers.

Judd also mentioned a vehicle crash that occurred May 9 in Mulberry, resulting in three deaths and serious injuries to an 18-year-old woman. The driver responsible, Elmer Bryan Giron-Canil of Mulberry, is a Guatemalan who was in the country illegally, Judd said.

"This guy here, had he been in his country of origin, had he not been smuggled across the Mexican border, we wouldn't have had this young lady in this crash and three people dead," Judd said, holding a mug shot of Giron-Canil. "Of course, he's treated and released."

The Florida Immigration Coalition points to studies, including a 2021 report from the Cato Institute, showing that felony arrest rates are lower for undocumented immigrants than for legal immigrants and native-born citizens.

Judd said that Mexican drug cartels are connected to trafficking operations in Polk County. He cited the 2021 arrests of six people allegedly selling crystal methamphetamine and other drugs in the county.

The sheriff said that illegal activity linked to Mexican cartels is occurring "while our president and the administration stands silent and allows the people of this country to be victimized."

'What's really happening at the border'

Judd flew to Tallahassee on Wednesday morning and joined DeSantis' team on an official state flight to Arizona, PCSO spokesperson Scott Wilder said. Judd spent Wednesday night in Tallahassee and flew back Thursday morning. Wilder did not have the total cost for the trip as of Thursday afternoon.

Speaking by phone Thursday, Judd said it was his first trip to the Mexican border and offered important insight into what he called a "crisis." He described seeing a watchtower across the border manned by a man identified by a local sheriff as a drug cartel member using binoculars to direct crossings away from patrol agents.

Judd said the sheriff told him and others that his crews have seen smugglers, known as coyotes, driving vehicles with license plates from Florida, Georgia and other states. He lamented seeing material for a border wall sitting discarded after Biden halted the construction former President Donald Trump had begun.

Though the discussion was broadcast and featured frequent denunciations of Biden, Judd rejected the idea that it was a political event or an element of DeSantis' presidential campaign.

He called it a policy and strategy session in which law-enforcement officials shared ideas on how to combat the effects of illegal immigration.

Judd said the education he received and contacts he formed made the trip valuable for Polk City residents.

“We have operational contacts that we didn't have,” Judd said. “But we really have the ability for me to shed light on what's really happening at the border, as opposed to only what people can see on the news. And I can tell you after seeing it personally and watching the news, you don't get the full impact. The news is skewed.”

Judd said he hasn't yet endorsed a candidate for president, but he strongly hinted that DeSantis will have his support.

“No, I have not formally declared an endorsement for him yet,” Judd said. “But I can certainly tell you, when I look at the productivity of all of those that are entering into the political fray for the Republican nomination and I set the politics aside and I look at the systems and practices and the work — all of them together don't compare with the accomplishments that Gov. DeSantis provided during his first four years as governor.”