

Caroline Heller:

On this episode of Good in Practice, I'm going to share some stories about pro bono work our attorneys and staff have done around the firm in 2020. And I think that this roundup is particularly important in what has been a very difficult year for most people. I've heard people use different phrases to describe this year or to try to inspire others to feel better in these very difficult times. One of these phrases is that at times of the adversity, a person's true colors are revealed, that we learn a person's true nature by witnessing how they handle the adversity, but I don't think that phrase is entirely accurate for what the world has experienced in 2020. It fails to recognize that for many, this year has been a year of trauma. And so how individuals have reacted to that trauma doesn't reveal their true colors, it reveals a trauma response. That response is often colored by experiences in our own lives that may have been beyond our control in the past.

Caroline Heller:

But one of the positive responses I've witnessed in this very difficult year at my firm is the desire of Greenberg Traurig attorneys and staff to use their unique skills to care for the most vulnerable in their communities. Because although this year has been a struggle for many, the ability to provide hope and the possibility of a better future to others is a way to manage and persevere through traumatic times. Hearing these stories also bring hope, and so my wish is that these stories bring you hope as you listen to them. Because we only have a little time together with each Good and Practice podcast, in order to summarize the pro bono work that our Greenberg Traurig attorneys have performed this year, I'm going to describe the winners of the Greenberg Traurig pro bono awards.

Caroline Heller:

Every year, Greenberg Traurig presents pro bono awards at the end of pro bono week, which is on October. The awards are Office of the Year, Shareholder of the Year, Of Counsel of the Year, Associate of the Year, Staff of the Year, and the Paul J. Brown Pro Bono Award, an award named in memory of one of our partners that is awarded to the attorney or team that has dedicated pro bono time to mental health issues. The winner of Greenberg Traurig's Office of the Year for 2020 was the Chicago office led by pro bono coordinators, Howard Jeruchimowitz and Thomas Dutton, who are also shareholders in the office's litigation practice. The Chicago office dedicated thousands of pro bono hours to a diverse array of cases.

Caroline Heller:

I'm going to give you just a few examples of the great pro bono work the Chicago office has been doing. The Chicago office submitted an amicus brief in the first circuit on behalf of amici, ASISTA Immigration Assistance, Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence, National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, National Network to End Domestic Violence, Safe Horizon, and Tahirih Justice Center, organizations that do work in the areas of domestic violence, including immigrant and refugee survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking.

Caroline Heller:

The amici's brief was in support of the petitioner appellant who sought review of a motion to reopen removal proceedings based upon a waiting list determination on his U visa petition. For those of you who aren't familiar with U visa petitions, they are visas that are set aside for victims of certain crimes who have suffered mental or physical abuse and are helpful to law enforcement or government officials in the investigation or prosecution of criminal activity. The amici argued that allowing removal of the

petitioner to proceed where the petitioner had received a waitlist determination would be contrary to congressional intent between the U visa program and unsupported by existing precedent.

Caroline Heller:

In another litigation commenced by the Chicago office, a team challenged the Illinois name change statute, which imposes among the harshest conditions of any state in the country for persons previously convicted of crimes to change their names. It is discriminatory in its application to transgender individuals, depriving them of due process and equal protection because it forces them to keep a name that does not match their true gender, subjecting them to discrimination, and sometimes physical danger.

Caroline Heller:

The Chicago office is also working with the domestic violence groups to seek a supervisory order from the Illinois Supreme Court requiring Cook County to come into compliance with the Illinois Domestic Violence Act. Namely that requests for emergency orders of protection are heard on the day that they are filed and that after hours and holiday access is provided as contemplated under the act. The Chicago office also worked hard to focus on non-litigation pro bono matters. For example, the Chicago office helped with the incorporation of an obtaining tax exemption status for multiple 501(c)(3) organizations. The Chicago office also performed general corporate matters for various non-profits, including drafting bylaws.

Caroline Heller:

One of its biggest accomplishments this year, however, was to also show attorneys that there's plenty of room to do pro bono, even when they're staying at home. And the Chicago office did this by having its first virtual pro bono fair. It had 19 organizations visit Greenberg Traurig virtually for a half-day pro bono fair. During the course of which, there were 20 to 25 participants on each session. The fair provided Chicago attorneys with an opportunity to learn about various pro bono matters and the nonprofits in the Chicago area. We are so proud of the Chicago office for all the work that they've done and the leadership that they've demonstrated in 2020.

Caroline Heller:

The Paul J. Brown Pro Bono Award is an award named in memory of a Houston office attorney who died in December of 2018. Paul was a litigation shareholder in the Houston office of Greenberg Traurig. For years, he also served as a dedicated pro bono coordinator. Paul had an unyielding commitment to helping others. Even after he stepped down in his role as pro bono coordinator, he remained dedicated to the pro bono program. Paul attended meetings of the pro bono coordinatorship retreats, and he supported the Houston pro bono coordinators and their continued efforts. Paul was also dedicated to the staff in his own office. After Hurricane Harvey hit Texas, Paul opened his doors, willing to consult with any staff member who was facing legal troubles as a result of the hurricane.

Caroline Heller:

Paul had a lifelong battle with mental illness, which was known only to his family and very close friends. He worked very hard to live a life that wasn't defined by his mental health issues. And while he succeeded for many years, in December of 2018, he took his own life despite tremendous support from his family, his GT family, and excellent mental health professionals. Greenberg Traurig chose to honor Paul's life and legacy of public service by creating the Paul J. Brown Pro Bono Award, which we present

every year to attorneys who provide pro bono legal services that address mental health issues. This year, the Paul J. Brown Pro Bono Award was given to a team in Greenberg Traurig's Denver office. That team consisted of Neil Oberfeld, David Palmer, Laurinda Frederick, and Matthew Tieslau who provided pro bono counsel to Judi's House in acquiring a site forward to new campus.

Caroline Heller:

I'd like to give you a little bit of history about Judi's House. When former NFL quarterback, Brian Griese, was just 12 years old, his mother Judi died of breast cancer. Along Brian's path to healing, he realized he wanted to give back to children and young adults who were also grieving the loss of an important person in their lives. In 2002, Brian and his wife, Dr. Brook Griese, a clinical psychologist specializing in childhood trauma and loss, founded Judi's House in Denver. In its 2019 impact report, Judi's House estimated that one in 14 children will experience the death of a sibling or parent by age 18, a figure that predated the COVID pandemic. Judi's House supports bereaved children and families through therapeutic assessments, counseling services, and community-based care. These services are provided free of charge to youth, ages three to 25, and their families.

Caroline Heller:

Since 2002, the organization has supported more than 11,000 youth and caregivers. In 2019 alone, Judi's House provided group and individual grief counseling sessions to more than 960 children and 680 caregivers. These record-breaking numbers underscore the vital and ongoing need for services in the area of addressing trauma and children. Beyond the services provided inside Judi's House, their community-based care team extends its outreach into the Metro Denver community through district-wide arrangements in four of the largest Denver Metro area school systems. The Greenberg Traurig team assisted Judi's House in acquiring a site for its new campus, which will allow Judi's House to expand and continue its necessary work. The team success is all the more impressive because this already complex deal process was made even more complex due to the business interferences related to the COVID-19 pandemic. We are so proud of this Denver team and their support of this necessary organization. There was no question that they were deserving of the Paul J. Brown Pro Bono Award this year.

Caroline Heller:

This year, Shareholder of the Year was awarded to two of our shareholders. The first shareholder is Michael Krauss, who is a shareholder in the Financial Services Litigation department in the Minneapolis office. Michael has represented a Cameroonian family seeking asylum in the United States and a youth soccer team in Minnesota. Most notably, Michael led Greenberg Traurig team to represent a Catholic priest and a federal death row inmate seeking to protect their first amendment rights to practice their religion, the federal death row inmate was Dustin Honken. Mr. Honken had been convicted of multiple murders and he was one of four death row inmates selected by Attorney General William Barr who decided to restart federal executions after a 20-year hiatus.

Caroline Heller:

Mr. Honken was described as a devout and pious Catholic who had repented 20 years ago for the commission of his crimes. Both Father O'Keefe and Mr. Honken had requested the right to have Father O'Keefe present during the execution to perform the sacrament of last rights at the moment of death, but Father O'Keefe was being denied permission to be physically present in the execution chamber with Mr. Honken. Greenberg Traurig attorneys commenced litigation to ensure that Father O'Keefe would be

able to be present during the execution. And additionally, so as not to force Father O'Keefe to risk contracting COVID-19 by exposure to multiple individuals during the execution process, Greenberg Traurig sought to stay the execution itself. A group of more than 1000 faith leaders also joined together to write to President Trump and Attorney General Barr, suggesting that the country should be focused on protecting and preserving life, not caring out executions.

Caroline Heller:

Although Greenberg Traurig was not successful in staying the execution, the Greenberg Traurig team's efforts did result in Father O'Keefe being permitted to be present in the execution chamber with Mr. Honken to perform the sacrament of last rights at the moment of his death. In addition, Michael is also the pro bono coordinator for the Minneapolis office and his leadership and guidance has been invaluable to many attorneys in that office who are also pursuing pro bono work.

Caroline Heller:

The second recipient of shareholder of the year is Jennifer Thomson, a shareholder in the litigation department of the Houston office. Jennifer never says no to an immigration case. She personally represents several minors in immigration proceedings, either in asylum petitions or in petitions for special immigrant juvenile status. In the spring, Jennifer coordinated and led a team of attorneys in drafting an emergency petition for writ of habeas corpus on behalf of over 100 immigrant parents and their children with final orders of removal. The petition alleged that the families should not be removed from the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic because immigrations and customs enforcement were not providing the families with adequate protection from COVID transmission during the deportation process.

Caroline Heller:

In addition to preparing the petition, Jennifer and the team also prepared a motion for a temporary restraining order prohibiting the government from removing the families from the United States until after disposition of the petition. The court granted it administrative stay to allow it time to consider the temporary restraining order. Although the court ultimately denied the temporary restraining order, the administrative stay provided the team time to amend the petition to add additional claims based upon new case law. During the time that the stay of removal was in place, USCIS revisited some of the final order of removal decisions, and dozens of families had their final orders of removal canceled and were granted notices to appear in immigration court to pursue asylum claims. Without Jennifer's dedication and coordination of the Greenberg Traurig team, as well as two immigration non-profits, many of these families would have been removed from the United States without ever having the opportunity to seek asylum here, an opportunity that these families desperately needed.

Caroline Heller:

This year, we had two winners for Of Counsel of the Year. The first attorney is Stephen Fowler, who is in our Washington DC office and focuses his practice on products liability and mass torts. For the past five years, Steve has represented indigent pro bono clients nearly every month. He represents victims of domestic violence in petitions for permanent protect borders as a volunteer attorney of the day through our program at Legal Services of Northern Virginia, a legal aid organization. Steve represents these indigent clients in full evidentiary hearings in the local Virginia domestic relations courts, usually against represented defendants. Over the past five years, he has obtained approximately 100 protective orders for victims of domestic violence.

Caroline Heller:

Steve's pro bono work continued an increase during 2020. Stay-at-home orders left many victims of domestic violence trapped with their abusers. However, under the Virginia code, protective orders take precedence on the docket. So Steve was able to appear for and successfully handle about 20 protective order hearings throughout the pandemic. These hearings are often contested requiring cross examination of multiple witnesses with little chance for preparation. Many of these hearings are also done through translators, which adds another layer of difficulty in a live hearing. The protective orders in Virginia are for two years and provide for extensive relief, including the ability for the victim to remain in the home, get temporary full legal custody of the children, and the exclusive use of the family vehicle.

Caroline Heller:

Steve frequently goes above and beyond simply representing his clients in court. He's brought bags of his children's outgrown clothes and toys to give to his client's children, and he will also appear at a house or apartment to supervise a defendant retrieve his belongings after the entry of the protective order. Some examples of cases handled by Steve this year include helping an adult daughter get an order of protection from her abusive alcoholic father. Steve also convinced the court to expand the protective order to include the young woman's dog based upon testimony of the father's abuse of the animal. Other cases involved non-custodial fathers who used force and threats in efforts to get access to their children during the pandemic. Recently, Steve obtained a contested protective order against a former police officer who fired shots at his ex-girlfriend's house and car while she and her mother and little sister were at home.

Caroline Heller:

The second winner of Of Counsel of the Year is Adam Siegler, who is an of counsel in Greenberg Traurig's Los Angeles office in its litigation department. Adam is also one of the pro bono coordinators for Greenberg Traurig. Adam has been a veterans advocate and provided pro bono services to veterans for over 20 years. Before joining Greenberg Traurig in 2010, Adam served as the staff judge advocate for the US Army's 335th Signal Command. He was also awarded the Legion of Merit Bronze Star Meritorious Service and Iraq Campaign Medals. Adam was profiled in a Law360 story for his tireless work on behalf of veterans, and he writes frequently on veterans' issues. Adam developed the violence guide on free legal services for veterans in California. He also chairs the Armed Forces Committee of the Los Angeles County Bar Association and serves on the American Bar Association's Legal Assistance for Military Personnel Committee. In recognition of his advocacy work, Adam received the Army Core Values Award from the chaplains of the 63rd Regional Support Command.

Caroline Heller:

Just a few of his recent pro bono representations on behalf of veterans include assisting a transgender Marine veteran who was being persecuted by his landlord, another Marine veteran who was overcharged storage fees for his truck, and an airman facing discharge based upon an unfair ruling. In one case, Adam assisted a multi-office Greenberg Traurig team, along with two immigration non-profits, to prevent the deportation of a five-year-old boy with a traumatic brain injury who had not received proper medical attention for his injury. Thanks to the efforts of Adam, the other Greenberg Traurig team members and the non-profits, the boy, his mother and baby brother were released, and he is now receiving the medical services he so desperately required. Under Adam's leadership, Los Angeles attorneys are also representing an individual facing the death penalty in Arizona for an alleged double murder, which his original trial team firmly believes he did not commit. And finally, as one of the pro

bono coordinators in Los Angeles, Adam remains committed to assisting other attorneys find pro bono cases and supporting that office's pro bono program.

Caroline Heller:

This year, the Associate of the Year Award was given to Michael Baier, a litigation associate in the Chicago office. For the past three years, Michael has led a pro bono team in representing a mentally disabled mother in order to restore her relationship with her three-year-old son. The mother was born with a severe intellectual disability. She was married pursuant to an arranged marriage, and her husband traveled to the United States to wed her and obtained a green card citizen status on the basis of his marriage to her. Following their marriage, the mother was subjected to mental, physical, and sexual abuse until she became pregnant. Even after their son was born, the father continued his mental and physical abuse until one day he vanished in the middle of the night with their then one-month old child.

Caroline Heller:

When Michael became involved in the case, the mother had not seen her son for nearly a year. Michael had an uphill battle in his quest to unify mother and child. State law concerning custody and visitation is generally discriminatory on the basis of disability, and courts routinely misplaced reliance on unsupported allegations of fitness based solely upon the fact that a person has a disability. In Illinois, for example, precedent has long held that disabled parent cannot have primary parenting rights over a non-disabled person. Notwithstanding this unfavorable law, after nearly three years of litigation, Michael has obtained weekly visitation between mother and son who have successfully restored their relationship and bond.

Caroline Heller:

His advocacy on behalf of his client has been extraordinary. He personally undertook investigations to locate and serve the father with the required legal papers. He had to appear in numerous divisions of the court to appoint a limited guardian of the mother's estate, and also to file a dissolution of marriage action. At every hearing, no matter how routine, Michael persistently and persuasively argued that his client had equal rights under the law. Michael argued that under the Americans with Disabilities Act, the court must make a determination about visitation and custody based upon an objective evaluation of the mother's fitness to parent her son without using her disability as a basis to automatically revoke those rights. There's no doubt that without Michael zealous representation, this mother and son may never have been reunited.

Caroline Heller:

This year, there were three winners of Staff of the Year. In no particular order, the first winner is Sandra Casallas, an administrative assistant in the Boston office. Sandra has provided translation services for attorneys working on two separate cases, helping unaccompanied immigrant minors in their petitions for asylum and for special immigrant juvenile status. Special immigrant juvenile status, for anyone unfamiliar with that, is a status available to immigrant minors in need of protection of a juvenile court because the child was abused, abandoned, or neglected by a parent. If special immigrant juvenile status classification is granted, the child becomes eligible to apply for lawful permanent residency, better known as getting a green card. Sandra goes above and beyond to provide translation services to assist in the attorney's representations of these two pro bono clients. Sandra has attended countless meetings,

translated emails and text messages, and is available to jump on a phone call when the attorneys need to speak to their clients or the clients call their attorneys.

Caroline Heller:

Last year was a particularly challenging one for one of the pro bono clients who had issues with homelessness, domestic violence, and also became pregnant. Sandra helped the attorneys to work with the Department of Children and Families and other community organizations to prepare a game plan to support the client once the baby arrived. Sandra accompanied one of the attorneys to see the client to get documents signed so the client didn't have to bring the baby out. While working remotely, Sandra has also continued to offer assistance by translating emails and with the client on conference calls. Equally as important, both clients have come to trust Sandra. These attorneys could not do their job advocating for their clients without her extraordinary assistance.

Caroline Heller:

The second recipient of the Staff of the Year Award is Dania Ochoa, who is the marketing manager in Greenberg Traurig's Mexico City office. Dania's daily work is related to the promotion of the commercial cases worked on by the attorneys in the Mexico City office. And this means that a huge part of her efforts are devoted to marketing, public relations and communications about the Mexico City's commercial work, both internally and externally. Dania is the only person in the Mexico City office working in marketing on commercial matters. However, Dania has shown a special interest and profound sensitivity to the pro bono matters that the Mexico city attorneys work on, and she is equally dedicated to promoting the Mexico City office's pro bono successes as she eased its commercial endeavors.

Caroline Heller:

Working with the Mexico City office's pro bono coordinator, Elba Gutierrez, Dania educates herself on the office's pro bono work, looks for opportunities to promote pro bono culture, and it helps to communicate the Mexico City office's pro bono work to those outside the firm. If you tuned into Good in Practice's Mexico City episode with Elba Gutierrez, which if you haven't, you should, you would know that pro bono work is not as institutionalized in the legal community in Mexico as it is in the United States. So Dania's commitment to promoting the Mexico City office's pro bono endeavors, both internally and externally, is critical to that office's pro bono mission. In short, she is essential to the Mexico City office's pro bono team.

Caroline Heller:

And the third recipient of the Staff of the Year Award is Miriam Rueda, who is a receptionist in the Houston office. Miriam has provided translation assistance to multiple attorneys working on several different cases involving unaccompanied minors, either in asylum or special immigrant juvenile status proceedings. Miriam has volunteered to come into the office very early or stay very late to assist in translating when attorneys have met with their clients. She has also attended court hearings to act as a translator to clients so they can better understand what's going on. She is always able and willing to help whenever any attorneys need help with translation services. The attorneys in Houston report that they could not provide the quality pro bono services to their Spanish speaking clients, were not for Miriam's dedication and assistance in the pro bono program.

Caroline Heller:

You have been listening to Good in Practice, Greenberg Traurig's pro bono podcast. I am your host, Caroline Heller, chair of Greenberg Traurig's Global Pro Bono program and litigation shareholder in the New York office. I hope this week's episode has brightened your day and inspired you to help someone in need in your community. Please join us in two weeks for another pro bono story.