

Speaker 1 ([00:00](#)):

Matt, can you tell us a little bit about yourself and a little bit about HomeSafe?

Matt ([00:07](#)):

Sure. A little bit about myself, originally from Boca Raton, Florida. I grew up down here, and I was in Chicago for a number of years, working up there, but then met my wife up there, decided to move back down to the area where I grew up, and landed a job here at back then the agency was called The Children's Place and Connor's Nursery. And that was, gosh, like 23 and a half years ago. And have been here ever since.

Matt ([00:31](#)):

So started out as their finance manager, progressively changed titles to finance director and then to chief financial officer. And then about 14 years ago, was asked to be the CEO. And so I've been the CEO ever since here, now at the agency, our official name is The Children's Place at HomeSafe, but we go by HomeSafe.

Speaker 1 ([00:55](#)):

And can you tell me a little bit about what The Children's Place at HomeSafe, which we'll call HomeSafe for the purposes of the podcast, what does HomeSafe do?

Matt ([01:01](#)):

What we've probably been most known for is taking care of the abused and abandoned population here in Palm Beach County. So we operate five specialized therapeutic group homes. They serve kids from an age range of eight to 17, and these are kids that have seen some significant trauma in their lives. They're typically in the child dependency system for about two years, prior to getting to our level. Unfortunately, they either fail up in the system and wind up at our level, or they're stepping down from the highest level, which is a locked residential treatment facility, down to our level, which we operate one step below that.

Matt ([01:38](#)):

And so any of the kids that come to us, they are court-ordered into our facility. They stay with us for about nine to 12 months, typically right around a year. And our goals are to step them down to a lesser level of care. And so they receive an awful lot of support services when they do come to us. We have full-time therapists, full-time youth development professionals that operate on a one-to-four caseload. Therapists are on a one-to-eight caseload. We employ nurses, we contract with psychiatrists to provide the psychiatric services.

Matt ([02:14](#)):

And these facilities are spread out across Palm Beach County. They take care of boys and girls, and we also have an area that we focus in on prevention. So to try to prevent kids from ever coming into the system of care, we have a team of about 55 employees that really focus in on the birth to age five population here in Palm Beach County. So we have staff that go to all the maternity wards each day, meet with the new moms and their babies, screen and assess them for an infant risk screening to see if they're at risk of abuse or neglect or at risk of developmental delays, in the hopes that those children, birth to age five, that they're eager and ready to enter into kindergarten by the time they reach age five.

Matt ([02:56](#)):

And so we also have a couple other programs that help support that, one called Growing Smart. It's kind of a surveillance program. So if we see mom and baby in the hospital, but they don't screen in for the whole evidence-based programs, we can watch that child for the next two years of their life. And so it's really to help those kids at birth, to make sure that if there's a developmental delay or some type of risk of abuse or neglect, we get the services in there so we don't see them on the back end of services.

Matt ([03:26](#)):

And then along those lines, we also have a prevention intervention program called SafetyNet. We work with victims of domestic violence. And so it's kind of on an outpatient basis, but they'll come to our Lake Worth campus. We've removed all the barriers. We hold it in the evening hours where it's convenient for the families. We serve the whole family. So when they come in, we serve the kids dinner, moms, or sometimes we will get a dad who is a victim, but they'll go off into their groups. We hold them in English and Spanish. We also pay for taxi or Uber for them to come. So we've tried to make it as convenient as possible for them to take advantage of it.

Matt ([04:06](#)):

And then lastly, the last program that we operate is called Pond Place, and it's a facility for the kids when they age out of foster care, if they want to continue their education. We have an 11 bedroom apartment complex, all single, one bedroom, one bath apartments, for them to continue their education. So a lot of the times children might be 18 when they age out, but they haven't finished high school. So they can transition over to Pond Place, stay there, finish, get their high school diploma, or better yet, if they're looking at achieving a vocational degree or an associates or a bachelors, we have the facility there where they can stay upwards of five years. So it's a wonderful program. All in all, we have 156 full-time positions and a budget of just shy of \$12 million.

Speaker 1 ([04:54](#)):

And are these children, children whose parents have had their rights terminated yet? Or are they temporarily in the foster care system, and one or another placements can't handle their needs? What is the typical background of a child who might join you?

Matt ([05:11](#)):

So it can be a little of both. It could be parental rights have already been terminated, and in most cases they're all wards of the state. So they're temporarily wards of the state. But a lot of the times, it's going to be kids that are failing up in the system. And then, you know, because the Department of Children and Families is going to try to place in the least restrictive setting. And so they might try an emergency shelter or a regular group home, but unfortunately that might not work out.

Matt ([05:38](#)):

I can tell you, there was a very positive story. So just prior to coming here, I was at our West Palm Beach campus and just met up with a family. We had a young boy, his name's Caleb. So in his situation, mom unfortunately had a drug problem. So the child was removed from mom's care. The grandparents took over the child. He was about eight years old at the time. What happened then because of that separation between mom, child starts acting out, and ultimately it becomes too much of a handful for

the grandparents. He has to come into the system of care. He falls up in the system, finally winds up at our level. Came to us last September.

Matt ([06:18](#)):

But very pleased, I just actually met mom for the first time up at our West Palm Beach campus, and she's completed the drug rehab program and they're actually looking at family reunification. So she just had the child for a weekend, like an overnight or over the weekend stay, to gradually get them reunified and ready to go. So in this case, a very happy ending. They're going to be reunified here, I believe it's in September, is the targeted date.

Matt ([06:47](#)):

And then one other thing that we can really make it a special piece is we had a local foundation that gave us monies, and we present the stories. They wanted to have a Christmas in July for seven of our families, and so they gave us \$7,000 each to give to each of the families. And so they were one that we selected. So she didn't know. She came in and we said, listen, we're going to pay for your first month's and multiple months' rent at a new apartment so that they can be together as a family again. So that's one opportunity. I have another one this afternoon, and then four more on Thursday. We'll be able to share that good news.

Speaker 1 ([07:26](#)):

Wow, that's wonderful. And to have a child to be able to be reunited with their parents, I know that there are lots of studies done on better outcomes for children or when they are able to stay with parents or be with parents who have the support that they needed to get through whatever they were going through. That's just the best outcome for a kid.

Matt ([07:45](#)):

Absolutely. And that's what we find. So if it can be reunification, then we'll work with the therapists and really strive for that and help to make that happen.

Speaker 1 ([07:57](#)):

And if, for example, the child isn't able to be reunified with his or her parents because the parental rights were terminated, is the goal to try to achieve, put the child in the best position to be accessible to a foster care family who might end up eventually being an adoptive family?

Matt ([08:13](#)):

Absolutely. Yes. And so I've got one other really good story.

Speaker 1 ([08:18](#)):

Yeah, keep telling them.

Matt ([08:19](#)):

We had one young boy came to us, and it was a very unfortunate situation. So he lost both his mother and his father, again, to drug overdoses. The one thing that he wasn't told, so he had been told all along that it was truly his father. Well, it wasn't. It was just the mother, he wasn't the biological father, but the boy didn't know that. So after the mom passed away, the biological father, who didn't know that he was

a biological father, but kind of did the math and thought about it, petitioned the Department of Children and Families for a paternity test. And then ultimately it came back positive.

Matt ([08:53](#)):

So this young boy, Jacob, got the wonderful news. I mean, here he thought he had lost both parents. And the father lives in Michigan. Well, he started trying to get back into his life. We did work through the Zoom because it was during the COVID period. And then ultimately what's really great is the dad wanted to be involved with him, and then we worked towards that family reunification. He is now up in Michigan with his father, and they too are another one of our families. So I believe on Thursday, we're going to have a Zoom with them to let them know we're going to help fund a new furnace at their house. So again, a wonderful outcome. We love those types of outcomes and the direction where they're going. To us, it really is so gratifying and is why we do what we do.

Speaker 1 ([09:42](#)):

That is. That's so fantastic to hear. David, I'd like to bring you into the conversation. Can you tell me a little bit about how you became involved with HomeSafe, just on a personal level, and then how you got Greenberg Traurig involved in supporting HomeSafe?

David ([10:00](#)):

Sure, I'll try. Before we get off the subject of some of the children, though, [inaudible 00:10:05], I guess, several of the children that have come to us have been in many different foster homes, and it just has not worked out. And HomeSafe has really provided a situation where they can thrive, which they've never been in before. I know some children have come to HomeSafe. They've never had their own bed. The kids have been through, many of them have been through really terrible situations, and HomeSafe is a real lifeline for them.

Speaker 1 ([10:38](#)):

Yeah. I'm glad you mentioned that, because obviously there are happy stories, but the happy stories aren't always about reunification. Sometimes they're giving the child the first place that they feel secure, that they feel like somebody cares about them and they have a place where they can be themselves and just be a normal kid.

David ([10:58](#)):

Yeah. As to myself, I returned to Palm Beach County in 1996, was looking for a community organization to get involved in. And a friend of mine worked at what was then HomeSafe. I met with Pat Rooney at the time, went on the board. And shortly after that, HomeSafe merged with Children's Place. HomeSafe's mission at the time was to bring children to a facility who had been abused and have them meet with the service providers, doctors, nurses, therapists, all in one place, so they weren't shuttled among a number of places.

David ([11:46](#)):

The Children's Place started as a program that for the most part helped babies with AIDS. That was in the eighties and nineties. And at the time it started, people were afraid to go near people with AIDS, and they were afraid of holding babies with AIDS and that sort of thing. So it was an organization which was really needed. Fortunately, over the years, medicine has kind of surpassed that program. So The

Children's Place and HomeSafe merged shortly after I got on the board, became the what in my mind is the premier children's service organization in Palm Beach County, as Matt discussed.

David ([12:39](#)):

Shortly after I was on the board, the organization, they had a campus downtown in downtown West Palm Beach, and was looking for more land to expand services. The organization arranged to swap a parcel of land with the city of West Palm Beach. The city owned about 10 and a half acres west of town. There was a land swap, and I did all the legal work for the conveyance of the land to HomeSafe and the trade with the city on a pro bono basis. I later worked on the construction of that campus. We call that the West Palm Beach campus right now. That was only, I don't know, Matt, 12 years ago or something like that?

David ([13:30](#)):

But although we had a great facility there in West Palm, it had a couple of negatives that we noticed over the years, one of which was there were two children sharing one bathroom. As our services expanded, we thought it was much better to have each child to have their own bathroom. We took back a mortgage, we stayed on the campus for a while, and essentially we decided to replace that campus with two smaller campuses. We had hearings before the zoning commission and the Palm Beach County commission. It was approved, but a neighborhood across the street appealed that approval.

David ([14:17](#)):

Fortunately, Elliot and others at Greenberg got involved. After I had done all the real estate work pro bono, we did the appeals representing HomeSafe, and the appeals pro bono. We won at the county commission appeal level. We one at the trial court level, circuit court level, which is normally a trial court, but it was acting as an appellate court. And then the neighborhood appealed it to the intermediate appellate court of the state of Florida, and we prevailed there, as well. So after all this work and travails, we won at every level. It's just a beautiful facility that is built now, and 12 young ladies are living there.

Matt ([15:14](#)):

You know, he puts that so lightly, as I'm staring at five inch binders, the transactions. And I was just in the book the other day, I had to pull one of the leases out. And they're amazing, what Greenberg does and how they put it all together, and the amount of work. And he just so nonchalantly just says, you know, and the heartache and the turmoil of going through all of those appeal processes, and then actually winning twice at the fourth district court, because they appealed it a second time. It wasn't enough one time. They had to do it again.

Matt ([15:51](#)):

But to know from the agency side that we had Greenberg on our side, one of the county commissioners put it so eloquently up there on the commission. And he said, what's playing out before us here is a battle between Greenberg and [inaudible 00:16:07], that this is a fantastic thing to watch. And was so glad to see we were on the prevailing team, which was fantastic, knowing that I had David and Elliot and Mark. And any time I have any type of issue, David is one of the first people that I go to. And if David can't help me, the thing is, David puts me in contact with the absolute right person.

Matt ([16:30](#)):

So we had an issue with windows at our brand new facilities that, you know, we had kids that were escaping out of the windows, and a lot of this was happening during COVID, or during hurricanes, they'll escape out of the windows. And yeah, we have alarms and stuff, but it's really a challenge. But at these new facilities that we're building, the fire code, we have plenty of exits and egresses for them to go, but we wanted to make sure we had fixed windows. And we had this problem. And David immediately said, let me get on this. I'll find somebody. He contacted David Ashburn up out of the Tallahassee office, and he has been helping us ever since.

Matt ([17:07](#)):

But even before that, before we engaged the contractor, we had this enormous contract that needed to be reviewed. And of course, who do I go to? David. David, do you think you could take a look? He said, oh, this isn't my specialty. But he goes, I know Michael Murphy in Orlando with Greenberg, he'll take care. And then, so it's just been, David is a true angel and a blessing that we have had here at the agency, always looking after us, always watching out for us, and has our best interest in mind.

Speaker 1 ([17:38](#)):

Well, I will say that is one of the great things about the firm that I've experienced on pro bono and on billable matters, is whenever a client has an additional need, there's an attorney at Greenberg who has the expertise. But I am going to say, you talk about this incredible work David does. And I've been with the firm for a long time, and I've been chair of the pro bono program for I guess about five years now. And David likes to do it laying low. I had not heard about this incredible work until recently.

Speaker 1 ([18:09](#)):

And even though I've spoken to you both before we're speaking now, I am still blown away. Because I like to say it matters what you do when nobody's looking. And David, I can't believe that for the past 12 years, you've basically been doing all of their real estate and everything else for them. That's just phenomenal, phenomenal.

David ([18:30](#)):

Well, I love doing it. It gives me a lot of satisfaction. It reminds me of the good that lawyers can do in the community.

Speaker 1 ([18:43](#)):

Well, let me ask a question for both of you, because you clearly could do probably anything you want, work with any organization. Matt, you could work with any organization you wanted to. David, you could choose to just give money to nonprofits or do pro bono work. What is it in particular about the mission of this organization that drew you to it?

Speaker 1 ([19:04](#)):

And David, you mentioned it has to do with children. And I think that every human being I've met, people generally care about children, but they don't always choose an organization that addresses the needs of children as the organization they want to work with. Some people like to work with different populations. So what is it about the mission of HomeSafe that drew you both to HomeSafe and keeps you there?

Matt ([19:27](#)):

So within my work history, I worked in downtown Chicago. I worked at the YMCA of the USA, had a great job there, and even more so had a wonderful boss. This gentleman was so bright and smart, and I was in the accounting side over there. And unfortunately during my timeframe there, and David kind of touched on it, so that was back in the early nineties, we lost him to the disease HIV AIDS. And so he touched me so much that I learned what it was like to work for somebody that was a fantastic boss, and how to treat others, as well.

Matt ([20:04](#)):

And so when I came to HomeSafe, and I was in the middle of the interview, and I did a little bit of research. I knew that they took care of abused, abandoned kids. But when I found out, when they told me that they had this program called Connor's Nursery and they took care of the HIV and AIDS babies, it was basically a pediatric AIDS facility, hospice facility for young kids, I thought to myself, oh my, this is the place for me. And that was 23 and a half years ago. And it's really been a special place.

Matt ([20:39](#)):

Since that time, I got married, I have two daughters. That's all they know. That's all they associate me with, is HomeSafe. And it's truly been a blessing to really work here. I think I've gotten so much out of it. And then we've grown to serve and to meet more families and kids who need these services. It's just been a wonderful opportunity for me.

David ([21:03](#)):

Yeah. And from my point of view, I guess, I have two children, a boy and a girl. They were pretty fortunate in their upbringing and their lifestyle. Just hearing about what some children have gone through really touched my heart, and I wanted to help them as much as I could.

Speaker 1 ([21:25](#)):

And David, you've been at Greenberg for a while. You are in the real estate department. Clearly you've got a lot of other things you could be doing, busy servicing commercial clients, clients that are not pro bono. I sometimes hear people ask me how, how can I juggle pro bono in my practice, or I find it a little bit difficult. What advice would you give our partners, our associates, our counsel, or what thoughts do you have on how you can do both? Because it is such an important component of being, I think being a citizen of the community we're in, of being a Greenberg Traurig citizen. So do you have any thoughts on that?

David ([22:11](#)):

Well, I think it's something that every lawyer should consider doing and should do. Lawyers have a monopoly that's granted to them by the state. And I think it's incumbent on lawyers to give back. And when I do a pro bono matter for HomeSafe, I just think of it as another client and fit it into my time and treat HomeSafe just like I would any commercial real estate developer. It's sort of the same work. I think most people think of pro bono work as litigation, and certainly there's important pro bono litigation, but as a transactional real estate lawyer, there's a lot we can do, as well, to help nonprofits.

Speaker 1 ([23:07](#)):

Yeah, I think that's right. People imagine standing up in court, fighting for somebody who has an innocence claim, exonerating someone in a dramatic court scene. And while that does happen and that's extremely impactful, transactional attorneys can affect and help nonprofits that serve hundreds or thousands of people. And so that impact is magnified, even if you don't see it in the individual face sitting next to you as you're doing the work. Obviously, transactional attorneys doing pro bono work are an incredible asset because the nonprofits that you get the litigations from wouldn't exist but for transactional attorneys helping them with their corporate work, their employee handbooks, things like that.

Speaker 1 ([23:51](#)):

David, have you ever had a chance to meet any of the residents that HomeSafe serves, in any capacity?

David ([24:00](#)):

Yes. Met them on, you know, I've taken tours of the facilities and met them through that. We try now to have some older residents speak at our board meetings, which are still Zoom right now, but to tell us a little bit about themselves and how HomeSafe is helping them. And when we were doing the zoning hearings for the Lyons Road facility, Matt had a young woman who had graduated from HomeSafe, and Matt, I believe she was at Pond Place and going to school to get her cosmetology certificate.

David ([24:46](#)):

We get to the zoning hearing, and there are maybe 75 people that are opponents, and they all have large buttons on that say don't allow HomeSafe essentially, and all this kind of stuff. We had asked her to speak on behalf of HomeSafe. And I took her outside and I said, gosh, these people are really difficult. They might say ugly things about you or HomeSafe. If you'd rather not get up and speak, that's fine. Just let me know. And she kind of looked at me and said, no, I've got it. I'm happy to speak. So Matt, you probably remember that. I mean, it was amazing.

Matt ([25:33](#)):

Oh, yes.

David ([25:34](#)):

She did a great job.

Matt ([25:36](#)):

She did. And they had some choice things to say about her. I mean, it was terrible, what they said about her afterwards when she got off. But that was a really difficult day. I'll never forget. There was only five of us against the 75 to a hundred. And they had, it wasn't even buttons. It was t-shirts with the big no, or whatever, the cat calling, the jeering, and the chairman trying to maintain order.

Matt ([26:05](#)):

And they came up to me afterwards, they came up, which one of you is [inaudible 00:26:11], and just coming up, and just finger in the chest, and you know, oh yeah. I was just blown away. And poor Martin Perry, the law enforcement escorted him out. He said, Mr. Perry, we want to make sure ... Martin's like, why are you walking with me? We want to make sure you get out of here okay today. I mean, that's how bad this group was. But that young lady, oh, she was fantastic. She got up there and just poured her

heart out and said exactly what it was like living there. And we're forever grateful. And I think it swayed the rest of the committee.

Speaker 1 ([26:52](#)):

I think that sometimes people in better positions sometimes forget that but for the randomness of life, that could have been their child or that could have been them. And it's clearly something that you both think about and know, and David I think even remarked that your children had the benefit of a really loving, supportive upbringing, and you recognized not every child has that opportunity, and but for some other random situation, maybe your daughters, you might not have.

David ([27:25](#)):

So true. They should be thankful that a beautiful facility like that is here in Palm Beach County to care for, whether it's their kids, their friends or relatives, or somebody, that there's a facility that's there to help.