

Caroline Heller ([00:04](#)):

Hi, this is Caroline Heller, chair of Greenberg Traurig's Global Pro Bono program and litigation shareholder in the New York office. I'd like to welcome you to Greenberg Traurig's pro bono podcast, Good in Practice, because everyone has a story.

Caroline Heller ([00:20](#)):

This episode of Good in Practice is in honor of Veterans Day. Veterans Day is a holiday that started as a day to reflect upon the heroism of those who died in service to our country and was originally called Armistice Day. It fell on November 11th because that's the anniversary of the signing of the armistice that ended World War I. However, in 1954, the holiday was changed to Veterans Day in order to include all veterans of all wars.

Caroline Heller ([00:48](#)):

In honor of Veterans Day, I wanted to highlight Greenberg Traurig's work for veterans and also for active military members. There's almost no better person to speak about this than Adam Siegler, who is of counsel in the litigation department in GT's Los Angeles office. He's a veteran and he's also one of the two pro bono coordinators in the Los Angeles office. In addition to helping others find pro bono work, Adam does a lot of direct representation himself, particularly direct representation of veterans and our active military service members.

Caroline Heller ([01:20](#)):

Greenberg Traurig attorneys work with a variety of organizations that help veterans and active military members. Among them are the ABA Military Pro Bono Project, the Veterans Legal Clinic at Harvard Law School, Public Counsel's Center for Veterans' Advancement, Swords to Plowshares, Homeless Advocacy Project, and Mission United Veterans Pro Bono Legal Project. In addition, Greenberg Traurig is currently sponsoring an Equal Justice Works fellow, Janeille McPhail, at the Community Legal Services of Mid-Florida, who will be advocating for the veteran population in and around Marion County, Florida.

Caroline Heller ([01:57](#)):

On today's episode, Adam's not only going to talk about the pro bono work that other attorneys at Greenberg Traurig perform for veterans and active military members, but he's also going to talk about his own service and why it is so important to him to continue to give back to those who served our country.

Caroline Heller ([02:14](#)):

Adam, thanks for joining us.

Adam Siegler ([02:16](#)):

Thank you, Caroline. I'm a litigator here in the Los Angeles office and I was a reservist for 21 years with the US Army. I can remember in the 1990s, after the first Gulf War, I felt that I should volunteer and put myself at the same kind of risk as others. So it was a mix of patriotism and a sense of adventure, I suppose. And I joined the reserves in the mid 90s. And back then, there was no long running war in Iraq or Afghanistan so it was a very different system. And over time, as you know, in 2001, it changed rather dramatically, and then it became pretty much a question of everybody deploying, and that dramatically changed the role of the reserves. We became an operational reserve and it was expected that many of

us would deploy. And I went overseas twice. I went to Egypt in 2005 and I went to Iraq in 2008, 2009. So it was a very different world after 2001, and it changed very dramatically for reservists.

Caroline Heller ([03:27](#)):

And what was your experience when you were deployed? Tell us a little bit about that.

Adam Siegler ([03:30](#)):

Well, I loved it. It was magnificently exciting and you get to work with people whom you really respect and care about. Even though it's a difficult environment overseas, the camaraderie and the energy is wonderful. There is some risk involved so you want to avoid getting hurt if you can avoid it, and it is a serious business. But I would say the morale was very, very, both times I went over. If I weren't married, I probably would've gone again, but I told my wife after I got back from Iraq, that the next time that some general called me up and offered me an opportunity to go to a combat theater, I would hand the phone to her.

Caroline Heller ([04:16](#)):

Well, I think that that makes good sense to be collaborative about it when you're in a relationship with someone you love.

Caroline Heller ([04:23](#)):

So you're at Greenberg Traurig, you're a litigator in the Los Angeles office and you're also one of the pro bono coordinators for the Los Angeles office, so can you tell us a little bit about how and why did you agree to become one of the pro bono coordinators, and how does that fit into your practice at Greenberg?

Adam Siegler ([04:46](#)):

Well, I'm very passionate about pro bono for all causes. I feel it's a very serious obligation that each of us has. I'm passionate about helping people who need help. And I particularly dislike seeing people being bullied by others or by the system. And so I really take up those fights with a lot of energy and a sense of purpose. And I got that when I was in the reserves as a junior officer. One of the roles that we play is legal assistance officer, and that role means helping other soldiers and reservists, active duty members and veterans, with their legal problems. And that opened my eyes to how many problems that service members have, and it's a wide range of things.

Adam Siegler ([05:30](#)):

You have to keep in mind there are three different groups really. There's the active military, people who are on these bases and deployed all the time. And then there are reservists who have another job in the civilian world, and every month they drill, and occasionally they go away for a year. And then veterans who have left the active and reserve system. Some of these veterans may have posttraumatic stress disorder. They may have wounds. They may have a variety of legal issues stemming from their prior service. So you have a very, very wide range of problems and legal challenges that all of these folks face. And it's the role of the legal assistance officer to do the best you can to help.

Adam Siegler ([06:15](#)):

And that's when I got really involved in volunteering outside of the reserve system, just as a pro bono attorney, helping all of these reservists and veterans and active duty service members. And that's something I've been doing since 1995, I guess. It's been a long time and it's a lot of work, but I really enjoy it. I'm passionate about helping these people because all of them stood up, took an oath to serve, which meant that they could be deployed anywhere in the world and at risk of their lives. And I always feel that we owe them every legal service we can provide to them to make their lives better.

Caroline Heller ([06:53](#)):

Well, I know that the attorneys at Greenberg agree with that as we have folks who do a lot of work, both for active military members, along with veterans. And I think at last count, we had approximately 80 attorneys and staff who self-identified as veteran or active reservist. But for the people who aren't aware of the types of legal services that veterans and active military members need, and you did allude to some of that when you were just talking about the work that you've done, can you talk specifically about not only the type of pro bono work you've done, but the type of pro bono work that other attorneys around the firm are doing?

Adam Siegler ([07:36](#)):

Sure, I'd be happy to talk about that. Let me just say this about helping veterans and military personnel. You don't need to be a veteran to do it. In fact, some of the most active and effective advocates for veterans turn out to be people who have not served. And I always say that when they do that, they are themselves serving. Service doesn't necessarily have to be in uniform. It has to be helping others at a cost to yourself. And that's what, to me, pro bono service is about. And the thing I love about the Greenberg Traurig lawyers is so many of them who are not veterans and some of them have no connection with the military, they volunteer and do a fantastic job. And I'm really grateful for their work and input and support. So the message I would give to everybody is you don't have to be a veteran or a service member to help veterans. And when you are helping veterans, I believe you are serving just as they did.

Caroline Heller ([08:39](#)):

I think that's a great point. I remember, maybe it was about, I don't know, five or seven years ago, I decided that that was an area that I wanted to explore because I'd done pro bono work in a lot of different areas, but that was... I wanted to support our veterans and I thought about, "Oh, what kind of volunteer work could I do, should I do?" And then when I started exploring the different options, I realized that a lot of people who aren't veterans are doing a lot of great pro bono work in this area. And I myself took an appeals case, and we ended up settling the case because the law had changed for this veteran who'd been denied benefits due to heart condition that arose from exposure to Agent Orange, but he had been denied it because he couldn't prove causation. And then the law changed and said, there's a per se causation. And we were able to get, I think it was \$50,000 in back benefits and maybe \$3,000 a month going forward, which is a tremendous difference to his life.

Caroline Heller ([09:42](#)):

And it made a great deal of difference to me to be able to serve in that way, when I myself, have never been in the military, but feel very committed to the people who do serve this country and put their lives on the line. So it was a great experience for me. And we have a lot of folks around the firm who are doing great work too, and I know you know a lot about it, so can you describe some of the other work that we've done in addition to veteran's appeals, which we do a lot? We've done a lot of work on

appealing the denial of benefits. What are some other ways that our attorneys have been helping people?

Adam Siegler ([10:16](#)):

Yeah, let's talk about the different types of work for veterans. For veterans who are out of the military entirely, some of the issues they need help with are benefits, which you so ably demonstrated, and that's why you're a leader in the pro bono world here at GT. The benefits are a very important aspect of it, but that can be somewhat technically challenging. But veterans also have issues relating to risk of homelessness. They have issues with tickets and warrants, which prevent them from getting a license, which prevents them from getting a job, which prevents them from showing up at court. And they get in this vicious spiral of being unable to cope with the legal system, and that's where we can really help.

Adam Siegler ([11:01](#)):

The LA County Bar Association has an Armed Forces Committee, and I founded it and shared that. We provide a clinic every month to deal with tickets and warrants and other obstacles to employment, and it tends to help people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. So that's at one end of the spectrum where veterans need a tremendous amount of help just to live a normal housed indoor life. And those are really important things, and they're easy for people to do because these are short clinics. There's no continuing obligation. So that's one example of helping veterans, but there are many others.

Adam Siegler ([11:40](#)):

Veterans are often victims of scams, financial scams. We're handling a case in this office where a female veteran was defrauded out of her house. If you are not angry about seeing something like that, someone who has served this country, at the risk now of losing their home to some fraud artist, if you're not upset and passionate about that, you're missing something. And I'm happy to say that we're doing a great job, and we're trying to turn that around. And that's an example where veterans become victims. Not necessarily related to their service, but because of their service, I think we owe them that extra measure of service in return.

Adam Siegler ([12:22](#)):

Another example that we're handling right now is a transgender Marine veteran. We're helping her dealing with some housing issues and discrimination. Again, here's somebody who volunteered for the Marines, and has a variety of legal issues. And without us, she would be in a very difficult spot. It takes sometimes tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands of dollars to run one of these cases, and only a big firm like GT can absorb that. And we do. So I'm really proud of the work that we do for veterans really across the spectrum.

Caroline Heller ([13:00](#)):

And what about active military? What are some of the legal challenges that they face? And if you could maybe discuss a case or two that we've done for active military members to sort of give some color to that, that would be great.

Adam Siegler ([13:17](#)):

Actually I'm glad you raised that because that's an example where the problems are entirely different. For active military, one of the leading issues that we see is family law. And the reason is that active duty

personnel move, on average, every three years or so. And when they do that, think of the stress on the family, particularly if there are children shared by former spouses. You suddenly have one spouse and the children moving 3000 miles away or even overseas. And you also have issues relating to deployment where one spouse is deployed and the other who may or may not be a service member is here in the states. And either side of that equation could run into a child custody or a family law type of problem.

Adam Siegler ([14:06](#)):

And so we've handled a couple of cases where one service member was in a foreign country or in a different state, there, the reach of Greenberg Traurig is really wonderful to have because we're able to reach out and make things happen across the world. So that's an example where active duty service members have very different types of stresses and legal challenges, particularly if they're in a deployed environment.

Adam Siegler ([14:32](#)):

And when I was in Iraq, we had all kinds of issues where young soldiers would have these emails and phone calls from home that were tremendously emotionally wrenching and had all kinds of legal ramifications. And if you help that soldier, remember, you're also helping somebody who's got to go out that day in an armored convoy, and they have to have their head clear. So by helping them in handling these legal problems, you're making them combat effective, and it's really a force multiplier. So, active duty members have this wide range of issues, and we can help, particularly because we're a global firm and we can really reach out across the world.

Caroline Heller ([15:18](#)):

And Adam, I understand you're also on the Standing Committee on Legal Assistance for Military Personnel for the American Bar Association. Is that right?

Adam Siegler ([15:27](#)):

Yes, I am. I'm very proud to be a liaison to their committee. And that raises another good point. In addition to family law, which the ABA LAMP committee provides us new cases every month, in addition to that, we're working on a discharge upgrade resolution. And the idea here is this to focus on veterans who've been discharged with other than honorable or dishonorable characterization of their service. And in some cases, that can cause them to lose veterans benefits or other benefits, and it can hurt them in the rest of their lives. And many of these people were dismissed for things that would now be recognized as not their fault or essentially trivial. I'll give you an example.

Adam Siegler ([16:13](#)):

In the Vietnam era, people were routinely discharged with bad paper as it's called for marijuana offense, which these days is fairly mild. And even worse, people were discharged from being LGBTQ, or they were discharged because they were the victims of military sexual trauma or assault, and that caused them to misbehave and get themselves kicked out of the military. We're now recognizing that these people deserve a discharge upgrade and a restoration of all those benefits, and that takes a tremendous amount of legal work too. So that's an example of something that the ABA is doing very well, and it's an area where we, as Greenberg Traurig, could help I think as well by mounting a national program to assist with these types of discharge upgrade reviews.

Caroline Heller ([17:08](#)):

Oh, yeah. I anticipate we're going to get very involved in that because that is really a big issue. My understanding to speaking with you and other individuals involved in the veteran's community, that being dishonorably discharged greatly affects a person because then they can't access benefits that might help them with whatever mental health issues, resulted in the honorable discharge that could have been through no fault of their own, or in the case where you're discharged because of your sexual orientation. You've served your country, you should be entitled to benefits. And because the law has changed, it's important to go back and retroactively fix that. So I really do hope that we do that once that program gets up and running.

Adam Siegler ([17:52](#)):

I think we're going to do that. And I want to mention here the leadership of General Altenburg. John Altenburg in DC is a retired major general in the Army JAG Corps. He's somebody I really look up to as a mentor and a leader, not just in the military, but in helping veterans. And he's been involved in all of these different national programs that we do. And I do want to recognize his leadership there. I view myself simply as one of his staff officers. I do the best I can and report to him, but his guidance and leadership in this area has been essential to the GT program.

Speaker 3 ([18:27](#)):

I'm glad you mentioned him. He is an incredible human being, and we are very lucky to have him, especially in the area of leading the pro bono veterans efforts.

Speaker 3 ([18:38](#)):

Adam, is there a particular veteran or veterans that you think about on Veterans Day?

Adam Siegler ([18:44](#)):

I do. I think about people I've served with, people that I served with who didn't come back, didn't come back alive. And I think about them on Memorial Day as well. But on Veterans Day, I try to remember with a smile the people I've deployed with and also the veterans that I've worked with. And one in particular comes to mind, I want to respect his privacy, but I can tell you his story. He was in the Navy. He had a traumatic thing happen to him there, and it caused him to wind up homeless on the streets of Los Angeles for more than a decade.

Adam Siegler ([19:26](#)):

So if you can imagine this once proud member of our Navy, sleeping in a cardboard box. He had a variety of issues that he was trying to deal with, but he did not accept that fate. And working with US Vets and other organizations, he got himself back on his feet and off the street. He got employed. And most importantly, he went back to school. I am proud to say he not only went to school and finished his college degree, he got a master's degree in social work, and I was there at his graduation. And I told him when he started that program, that I would help him with books and computers. And a bunch of us people in the firm and even clients got together and helped him. And I was there at his graduation. And he's now doing social work for other veterans on the street.

Adam Siegler ([20:24](#)):

And the message that I would like to give to everybody, is when you see that homeless veteran in a cardboard box or pushing a shopping cart under the freeway, you should think about the fact that that

veteran might be the next person graduating with a master's degree in social work. Every one of those veterans has worth and value and tremendous potential. And I would like people to think about that when they see these tents and homeless veterans, that if they help that veteran, they might someday be attending that veteran's graduation. And that's something that we can and should do not just on Veterans Day but every day.

Caroline Heller ([21:10](#)):

Well, I can't think of a better reason for our attorneys and staff to get involved in pro bono work, is to remember that behind every story they read, all the case lists, that's a real human being, like you say, who has value and has worth and can contribute something, and in the case of veterans, have already given something to our country. So thank you for telling us that story, Adam. That's extremely important for people to hear.

Adam Siegler ([21:42](#)):

Thank you, Caroline. I feel that I owe this service to all my fellow veterans, and I think about that on Veterans Day. How can I help my fellow veterans? We have a saying that we will never leave a fallen comrade. And when I see somebody in a cardboard box under that freeway overpass, that is my fallen comrade, and I'm going to make sure that they get back up. So that's something that I think about on Veterans Day, and I hope all of you will. I know that you do. And I've been tremendously cheered by the amount of support, real support and energy and activity and good work by Greenberg Traurig lawyers across the country and throughout the world in helping these veterans. So from this veteran to all of you, I would say, thank you so much, GT, for all that you do for veterans.

Caroline Heller ([22:40](#)):

Well, Adam, we're doing this interview in honor of Veterans Day, but that's just one day out of the year. And I know that I'm probably speaking completely for you and for a lot of other people who are dedicated to these issues that we can't just remember our veterans in active military one day out of the year, this is a year-long cause. And it's important for people not only to honor veterans on Veterans Day, but to honor them and our active military throughout the year, by doing this pro bono work. And I also just want to say to you, as I've said to you before, thank you for your service, not only to our country, but to Greenberg Traurig, because thanks to your leadership and the leadership of Vince Chieffo, who's your co-coordinator in LA, the LA office has really done some extraordinary work. And your leadership on military pro bono work and veterans pro bono work is extraordinary, and I know will continue to be, so thank you.

Adam Siegler ([23:35](#)):

Caroline, thank you so much for your leadership of the GT pro bono program. All of us look up to you, not just in veterans affairs, but in immigration cases and every other aspect of pro bono. So I'm really proud to be part of the team with you. And I'm really impressed and excited about GT's commitment to helping veterans really, not just across the country, but across the world, not just every day, but all year. And for the rest of our legal lives here, I intend to keep doing whatever I can. Thanks.

Caroline Heller ([24:12](#)):

You've been listening to Greenberg Traurig's pro bono podcast, Good in Practice. I'm your host, Caroline Heller, chair of Greenberg Traurig's Global Pro Bono program and litigation shareholder in the New York office. With me on today's episode was Adam Siegler, who is of counsel in Greenberg Traurig's Los

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Angeles office in the litigation department. He himself is a veteran and one of our pro bono coordinators in Los Angeles office. Thanks for listening today, and I hope you join us next time for another pro bono story.