

Good in Practice: Episode 9 | Lobbying For a Cause

Caroline Heller:

Elizabeth, can you tell us a little bit about your role at Greenberg Traurig and the work that you do?

Elizabeth Hadley:

I'm a shareholder in the Austin, Texas office, and I'm in both the government law and policy practice group, and the litigation practice group. So I lobby here in Texas, I represent a wide variety of clients before the Texas legislature, Texas state agencies, governor's office, anything at the state level, and then some local as well. And then I also work with our product's liability litigation team, and work on pharmaceutical and medical device products, liability cases in Texas, and also in Mississippi.

Caroline Heller:

And Gus. Can you tell us the same, a little bit about the work that you do at the firm?

Gus Corbella:

Absolutely. I've been with the firm for the last 16 and a half years. I'm a senior director in the government and law practice here in the Tallahassee, Florida office, and much like Elizabeth, I represent a spectrum of clients before the state legislature, before executive agencies and the governor. Also do some federal work from time to time. My main work is with the government law practice, although I also do some work with the healthcare, and with the entertainment practices as well.

Caroline Heller:

So I have you on the Good in Practice podcast, so we're obviously going to talk about pro bono, but I'd love to hear from you and Elizabeth, why don't you start about how you got involved in pro bono? Because when most people think of pro bono, they think of litigation. Sometimes they think about helping a nonprofit with a real estate deal, but I think very few people think about lobbying. So can you tell us a little bit about how you got involved in pro bono work using your skills and what you were able to accomplish?

Elizabeth Hadley:

I guess for starters, I've been at Greenberg actually eight years today, it's my anniversary-

Caroline Heller:

Oh, congratulations.

Elizabeth Hadley:

Thanks, and I have found the firm to be such a great supporter and proponent of pro bono work, the whole time that I've been here. And that's something that I was really excited about. For a long time, been really involved in community service, and served in various nonprofits here in Austin, and it's just something that I grew up with, something my mom was always involved in too. So I think the aspect of doing some pro bono where it came naturally to some extent, but at the same time, I didn't do much pro bono work before I got engaged on the legislative side, because I just thought some of those things were outside of my wheelhouse, and in what you think of in the traditional pro bono sense.

Elizabeth Hadley:

And actually, how it first started was Jennifer Thompson, who's a shareholder in our Houston office, came to me and just knew of my general community service work, being the board of Dress for Success, and being involved in junior league, and different things and said, "Hey, I work with this nonprofit, and they need help trying to pass legislation, and I thought of you," because she knew I lobbied in Texas and said, "Is that something you would be interested in helping with?" And I said, "Sure, I'd love to do that." And not even really knowing exactly what that would be, but obviously know how to work on legislation, and pass bills and things like that. So she put me in touch with them, and we just went from there. I got it approved with you and the pro bono group in the firm. And it was to represent the Tahirih Justice Center, which is a national nonprofit, and they have a Houston office who Jennifer worked with regularly.

Elizabeth Hadley:

And so they focus on a lot of matters related to domestic violence, human trafficking, immigration, among other things, and this big initiative that they were working on in a number of states was to essentially end forced underage marriage in states where there was not a floor for the age of marriage, or one that was perhaps too low. So this is obviously not something that I work on in my regular paid work, and it was really interesting, and sad to learn that there were thousands and thousands of underage marriages that they generally find, based on the data and statistics, are forced in one way or another in Texas, because there was not a floor for the age of marriage in Texas. You could go to a judge, and I think it was one parent, and just ask to get a marriage certificate for a child of any age. And basically, it was given to you. And I don't mean to say that too flippantly. Obviously, never did that, but my understanding from what they had seen is that it was not too difficult to do.

Elizabeth Hadley:

So they set out to set a floor for the age of marriage so that you couldn't have, say, somebody for maybe not the best intentions trying to push a twelve-year-old into marriage or whatever.

Caroline Heller:

And my understanding is that there are quite a number of states in the United States that do not have an age limit for child marriage.

Elizabeth Hadley:

Right. So I don't want to [inaudible 00:05:22] anything. It's just Texas, there are a lot of States, and they were already safe that they had done this work in. So they had already worked on this, I believe in New York, they were working on it in Virginia around the same time. And I can't remember what other states, but yes, it's definitely something that is in a number of states around the country, which I think is shocking, because most people probably don't think that today. And so this was one of their big initiatives. They had already drafted a bill, they had already talked to some people here, but they didn't really have the tools to actually try and pass a bill. And so that's where I came in, and signed them on as a pro bono client, and got registered with them as a lobby client here in Texas. And we got to work. So we got bill sponsors, and that, as Gus can tell you, is one of the most important things you can do in trying to pass legislation, is who your bill sponsors are going to be.

Elizabeth Hadley:

And so I asked someone who's very senior in the house, and well-respected representative, Senfronia Thompson to carry it, and she enthusiastically said yes. And it's interesting to mention too, she is a democratic member in the house. The longest serving female, and I believe the longest serving African-American member in the Texas house. And then the Senate sponsor, who the client had actually already talked, with was a more conservative Republican member in the Senate. He's since been elected to Congress, and represents Texas and Congress now, Senator Van Taylor, at that time. And so it was one of those things where it was a great combination of a bipartisanship to get this done, and we had a lot of different stakeholders and coalitions come together on both sides of the aisle to say that this is not how it should be anymore in Texas. And so long story short, we got the bill passed, it passed in the house and the Senate, and was signed into law by Governor Abbott. And that was the 2017 session. So that's when that happened.

Caroline Heller:

Elizabeth, can you tell me a little bit about whether or not there were any challenges that you didn't anticipate, and also, did you approach this pro bono lobbying project any differently than you approached any of your other paying work?

Elizabeth Hadley:

To answer the second question first, no, I didn't approach it any differently. I sat in the hearings, I worked to get the bill scheduled for committee hearing. I worked the members to get the votes. I followed it the whole way through to make sure it would pass. We talked to the governor's office to make sure there wasn't an issue with a potential veto. So exactly the same way I work on legislation for other clients, paying clients. I went about this exactly the same way. And it also allowed me to work with so many different people who I may not necessarily cross paths with in some of my paid lobby work, just in subject matter area, and legislative members who may not necessarily be on the committees that I might normally work with. So it was really a great experience too, just to get to meet and work with people, and understand a different area of the law and legislation.

Elizabeth Hadley:

In terms of any issues, there weren't many. There was one more conservative group who made a little bit of noise, who felt like that they should be able to decide when their kids get married, and they didn't want that something like this in place that would interfere with that, but they didn't really do a whole lot of work to try and stop it. And that's where it became so important that we had such a bipartisan coalition. And so our conservative Republican Senator was able to talk to that group and say, "Look, here's why this is important and why we need this," and kind of allay their concerns. That played into the strategy though in how we worked on the bill, where we didn't want to create a lot of press or big fanfare over it, because we didn't want to draw people in who might have other concerns, or sort of ill will toward it.

Elizabeth Hadley:

So that really did play into how we worked on it and kind of kept it focused, not under the radar necessarily, but just on track, don't create a bunch of fanfare, and make a big deal about it until we're done, and then we can celebrate. And so that's what we did.

Caroline Heller:

Texas is not the only state that didn't have a law like this. Can you tell us a little bit about how you ended up expanding Greenberg Traurig's work in this area to our Florida offices?

Elizabeth Hadley:

Sure. So obviously, I worked really closely with this nonprofit. Some fantastic people there who really, this was one of their missions, to get this kind of legislation passed across the country. They were such experts in the subject matter of [inaudible 00:10:43] as I said earlier, it's not that I necessarily was, but I'm an expert, well, I don't mean expert, but I know the legislative process. So they said, "We really would like to do this in Florida too." Texas and Florida, along with New York and California, tend to be States that people want to get legislation passed in, because it speaks volumes to the rest of the country if you get things done in those bigger states. And they said, "We really would like to talk to somebody in Florida." And I said, "Well, I've got great colleagues in Florida who lobby there, I'd be glad to talk to them."

Elizabeth Hadley:

And I reached out to Gus Corbella, who I'm so thankful to work with, and said, "Hey, I just did this great pro bono project in Texas legislatively. Would you be interested in this?" And he enthusiastically said yes, and kind of the same, as here he knew exactly the right people to talk to and all that. So I'll let him talk about the Florida piece, but it was a really great deal that we were able to help them and another really important and big state to get this done. And that's just one of the great things about the GT platform, that we have that to offer.

Caroline Heller:

So Gus, tell me a little bit about what you thought when you got the message from Elizabeth about working on this project.

Gus Corbella:

Well, I'll tell you that my reaction to her request was the reaction that I experienced through the many months that I worked on this issue. It was shock that this was even an issue to have to deal with. A lot of people that I've worked with, legislators and staff and others were completely shocked that there was nothing in law to prevent underage child marriage in the state of Florida. And Elizabeth and I work in a process where laws are passed regularly every year, and certain laws just kind of get buried in the books, and people either forget about them, or don't know that there's a need for change. So first and foremost, kudos to Elizabeth for bringing it to my attention. As she said, when she mentioned it to me, I had very enthusiastically jumped on board to try to be of whatever help I could be here in Florida.

Gus Corbella:

GT has always had a culture of service, one which they promote and appreciate very much. And I personally am very involved locally here in a number of different charities, other events that I participate in personally. But prior to coming in Greenberg, I had served as the chief of staff of the Florida Senate, had run the majority offices in the house in the Senate. So I knew that even though this was a pro bono effort, that we would have the tools necessary to kind of work through the process, and bring about some positive change. It was one of those to whom much is given, much is expected of situations. And so when Elizabeth made me aware of this, I immediately,, of course signed on to be of help here in Florida. And with issues like this in particular, I always like to say that we kind of capture lightning in a bottle.

Gus Corbella:

You have to be able to find the right sponsors at the right time, have the right meetings and conversations, manage the debate appropriately throughout the legislative process in order to create change in the end. And I think that our situation here in Florida was similar to the one in Texas. First of all, Florida ranked second highest among all states in the total number of under-aged married children when this effort began, and it was perfectly legal for girls younger than the legal age of consent to be married to much older men, which of course undermined statutory rape laws and shielded perpetrators from their accountability for their crimes, and really trapped young vulnerable girls in a pattern of long-term abuse. Just some of the stories that you start hearing when you start working on these things are just jaw-dropping. And that's what I encountered with a lot of legislators.

Gus Corbella:

There was just this, I don't want to say it was ignorance. It was just that this was something that was going on that a lot of people just did know. It was not willful, but clearly needed some change. So I was very fortunate also during this process to work with an incredible advocate by the name of Sherry Johnson. Sherry is a nationally known and recognized advocate for ending underage marriage. And back in 2013, she published a book on just the horrific abuse and exploitation that she'd suffered as a child. She had been forced to marry at age 11 to a 20-year-old man who had raped and impregnated her, and just had horrific experiences as a child. And I'm sure Elizabeth will agree when I tell you this, that she and I might be experts in navigating the process.

Gus Corbella:

I always tell people that my job is to help clients navigate through the jungles of government. So I'm the guy up front with a machete tearing the path. But if it wasn't for Sherry being a part of this effort and in her personal story, which is just so gripping and so moving, I and Elizabeth could lobby till we're blue in the face. But when you hear of those personal stories, it makes an incredible impact. So kudos to Sherry for her advocacy and her engagement, which was just invaluable in my efforts here in Florida,

Elizabeth Hadley:

Yeah, I forgot about that. I'm glad you mentioned that, because we had some survivors like that here in Texas who worked as well. And when they came and testified before the committee, when the bill is up for committee, it's like you said, Gus, it's just gutwrenching to hear what some of these women went through, and their survival stories. So having the people who experienced these things just puts a whole different face on it than what Gus and I can go just to lobby it through the whole process.

Caroline Heller:

And Gus, can you tell us a little bit about, how did you find it was easy to get folks on your side? Or was it a little bit difficult in certain situations? If you could just tell us a little bit about the challenges that you faced in any in taking this on.

Gus Corbella:

Sure. In Florida, I was extremely fortunate too, as Elizabeth mentioned earlier. Finding the right sponsors is critical to ensuring success, and having your issue enacted into law. And I was incredibly fortunate to work with two dear friends and colleagues, Senator Lizbeth Benacquisto, who has since turned out from the Senate, and representative Jeanette Nunez, who is now currently our Lieutenant governor. Both women at the time were incredibly powerful legislators. Senator Benacquisto was the rules chair of the

rules committee, and representative Nunez was the Speaker Pro Tem of the Florida house. So to be able to get these two very high profile legislators, these two very well-respected women to be the advocates on the sponsor side of the legislation was a huge boost to our efforts. And initially, the legislation passed out of the Senate unanimously.

Gus Corbella:

Caroline, you asked about challenges. The challenges that we met were mainly in the house, and legislators in the house whose own personal family histories had parents who had married young, and had stayed married, and lived happily ever after who maybe felt that if the law was passed, had said that since their parents had married young, that that might've been a slight on their families, I can understand maybe how they felt that way. But obviously, that was not the reason for passing these laws. So that's kind of where the negotiation started is, okay, well, respecting those concerns, what can we do to really have an impact and change the law in Florida? And what we came up with was a proposal that banned marriage entirely under the age of 17, and then also prevented a 17-year-old from marrying somebody that was two years older than them.

Gus Corbella:

So in that way, we were able to really just reign this issue in, and first and foremost, prevent these horrific underage marriages that were taking place. But also at the same time saying, okay, if you are 17 and you are going to marry someone, they cannot be older than two years older than you currently are. And I know that if our law that we passed had been in place in previous years, it would have stopped about 65% of some of these marriages from taking place over that period of time. So we came upon that compromise, passed the law out of the legislature, on governor Scott. Now, Senator Scott signed it into law, and it's one of those things that I know that everybody here involved, it's something that they can point to and be proud of being a part of for a very long time.

Caroline Heller:

Yeah. It's incredible work. And I'll ask you the same question I asked Elizabeth. Was there anything that you did differently than you would have if it had been a paying client or any strategies that you did differently?

Gus Corbella:

No. There's obviously things that we all have to do with all of our clients to make sure that our efforts are successful. I think the only thing that was different to this is there was almost like a very personal stake in it, as a father myself, and as somebody who likes to think that the work that we do is meaningful. I was very personally invested in this issue. Obviously, when you do pro bono work, what you're doing is you're taking very valuable time and very valuable relationships, and putting those to work in order to pass something, especially something as major and significant as this into law. So I would say that if anything, above and beyond what I do from day to day, I really kind of took this one personally, and devoted a lot of time and effort into it. And fortunately in the end, we were successful in making a major change.

Caroline Heller:

So Elizabeth, I understand that after doing this pro bono case, you decided to take on another. Can you tell us a little bit about that one?

Elizabeth Hadley:

Sure. So the friend who I had gotten to know from some local lawyer groups, and I didn't know her super well, but she came to me and said, "Hey, I know you worked on that underage marriage legislation last session, would you like to help us?" I said, "Well, sure, what is it?" And so she's an amazing, brilliant attorney who started a nonprofit organization in Texas called the Lone Star Justice Alliance. And she has made it her life's work, and just put everything into creating this organization that helps juveniles and adults who have been convicted of crimes, largely while being abused or trafficked. So people who have been in domestic abuse or human trafficking situations, and at the hands of their abuser or trafficker, are forced to commit crimes, and that's a variety of things.

Elizabeth Hadley:

Again, criminal law is definitely not my wheelhouse. I've never practiced criminal law. This was totally an eyeopening thing for me to see how all this works. And so what she wanted to do, she had come up with this legislation to put into place a path for clemency, for these victims who'd been convicted of crimes in those situations where there's evidence of trafficking or domestic abuse, but for one reason or another, either it didn't come out at trial, it wasn't available at trial, all kinds of different things. And these people are sitting in jail, and probably need other services, and not to be sitting in jail. And I also found it fascinating that a lot of the times, the abusers and the ones who forced them to commit the crimes, the ones who were trafficking them or other things maybe didn't end up in jail.

Elizabeth Hadley:

And talk about gut-wrenching where the women, in this case, I'm sure there are men out there who are in this situation as well, but the witnesses that we had were women who testified, and they've just been in unimaginable circumstances in their life. And then the ones who finally get out are trying to get their lives back together and get jobs, and that's very difficult once they've been in prison anyway. So it's just a whole cycle. But the problem was, and again, this is not my area, so I may say something slightly incorrectly, but apparently, it was very hard to try and get a clemency application granted, because you have to go back, I think, to the prosecutor, and go through all these steps to try and get that done. And I think generally, prosecutors, as I understand it, don't want to see convictions that they've gotten overturned necessarily. And so it's very, very difficult.

Elizabeth Hadley:

So she came up with a way to sort of create this special path, this special process under the Texas board of pardons and paroles and the governor's office. So again, we got great sponsors in the house and the Senate. It was a little harder to get it through the Senate initially. The board of pardons and paroles at first, apparently, behind the scenes were not sure they liked this because it didn't circumvent them, but it changed some things about their process. And so we had a little bit of difficulty there, but we were able to get it through the house first, we got it over to the Senate, and then got it out, and it actually passed unanimously out of the house and Senate, which is not that easy to do, especially with something that has any sort of, some people might not like it.

Elizabeth Hadley:

And then it got vetoed, and it stung really bad. And it was actually the first and only bill that I've worked on that got vetoed, and come to find out, I think there was just an internal politics where there were some things that the governor's office just thought needed to be a little different, and they were not quite on board with how it passed, even though it passed unanimously. So my clients who, like I said,

this is what she does, and she's such a great legal mind in this part of the world, in this area of criminal law, she went to work and started talking to stakeholders and the governor's staff about what we could do with us. And so we didn't know if we would be trying to come back and pass a little bit different bill this next session, which starts in 2021, cause we're only in session in Texas every odd number of years.

Elizabeth Hadley:

So once you get a bill, once you get done with a session, you have another two years before you go into session again. So it's a big gap in between anyway. So they started talking to people, and they were able to come up with a way to get this project underway, and do essentially what the bill did, but in such a way that the governor could implement it himself, and they call it The Survivors Project. And so it's not exactly how the bill was written, but it's the same general idea where it's a path for clemency that is more direct than having to go, and I guess get all the people down the line to say that this was a bad conviction or whatever. So that's underway, and GT is partnering with them on that part of it as well.

Elizabeth Hadley:

So we've helped them with everything they need from documents and forms and advice and things on how to do this work and represent these clients, and it's great to be able to partner with them on this side of it now that it's in place. So I think we'll be able to see great things, and big kudos to the governor and his staff for seeing that this was something that was needed and working, continuing to work with the stakeholders, even after the legislation and the veto, to find a way to make this work for these people in Texas who need this chance to get their life back together.

Caroline Heller:

Yeah, and the story has an important lesson in it, which is never give up. And you mentioned it stung, I think, having lost some pro bono cases, and not that many, but when it happens, it stings because you're dealing with humans whose lives have been greatly affected by just the randomness of life, where they were born, who they were born to, and you really think you're on the side of right. And when it doesn't work out, it more than stings, but it's wonderful that you were able to actually go back with the group, and get something done that basically has the same effect.

Elizabeth Hadley:

Yes, yes. And I know the woman who has this other organization, her name is also Elizabeth, and they've just had their first one or two applications granted where people have been able to get out. And like I said, it's this really interesting thing. And it's really foreign to me, even though I also practice litigation, just because I don't do criminal law, where apparently, evidence of domestic abuse, and even human trafficking, sometimes is not really evident, not really readily available. And it can take years, I learned, for them to really have the evidence in place that shows that that was taking place. And it may even be out of other additional crimes or convictions that come along later, before they can really show that this person over here, who was already convicted, was also the product of trafficking or abuse. So it's just a sadly fascinating part of the criminal law world that I didn't know was such an issue.

Caroline Heller:

Yeah. That is an unfortunate part. Before we wrap up, Gus and Elizabeth, I wanted to give both of you an opportunity to say anything that I haven't asked about that you would want folks to hear about, either what it was like to do these cases, the importance of pro bono work, or anything that you just think is

important to the story that you would want to have folks around the firm or outside the firm hear about?

Gus Corbella:

Well, definitely to whoever in the firm is doing pro bono work, first and foremost, our thanks and gratitude. And I guess what I would like to do is not only encourage our colleagues within the firm, but particularly encourage my colleagues within the government and law practice to really consider opportunities that you can do every session where you could help on a pro bono basis. And I can tell you, not only from this particular experience, but from other things that I've been able to do that have been similar, that you will always remember and think back on these experiences in particular, these legislative victories, as the most rewarding ones of your lobbying career. It's obviously an incredible privilege to represent clients from all walks of corporate America, but it's really these unique situations that fall on your lap, and you realize that you are able to use those skillsets and those relationships to the advantage of making some significant and impactful change that are most rewarding. And I know that it was a special situation for me to work on this, and I'm looking forward to doing more of it in the years to come.

Elizabeth Hadley:

I would just concur with everything Gus said, and you can't really put into words how rewarding that is. I actually just was in a working group meeting yesterday with the state bar of Texas. I just served as the chair of the legislative and campaign law section for the state bar of Texas. And now as past chair, I'm the liaison for that committee to the pro bono section of the bar. And I wanted to do it because I wanted the bar and the state bar of Texas, which is a huge bar organization, to see that legislative pro bono work was another way to do it as well. And so it's been super interesting to get to work with them and shed light on the ways that we've done pro bono work on the legislative side, and try and get more lawyers, not just in our firm, but also around the state engaged in that. So again, I just encourage everyone to look for ways to be involved, and I honestly hope that I can have at least one pro bono project each session to work on, because it's just been such a great experience.

Caroline Heller:

Excellent. So I want to thank you both for your work, and it's truly incredible, and I'm so, so, so glad that you're so enthusiastic about doing at it, and that you're my colleagues.