

Caroline Heller:

Hi, this is Caroline Heller, chair of Greenberg Traurig's Global Pro Bono Program. I'd like to welcome you to Greenberg Traurig's pro bono podcast Good in Practice, because everyone has a story.

Caroline Heller:

On today's episode of Good in Practice, I continue my interview with Jeff Ginsburg, the chief executive officer of the East Harlem Tutorial Program, and Stephen Rabinowitz, who is the co-chair of Greenberg Traurig's global real estate practice.

Caroline Heller:

On part one, we learned about the East Harlem Tutorial Program and Greenberg Traurig's longstanding relationship with the program and its pro bono work. In part two, we learn more about the East Harlem community and how pro bono clients' cases are as complicated and sometimes more complicated than paying clients and how Greenberg Traurig's work for the East Harlem Tutorial Program mirrors the work that it does for its paying clients.

Caroline Heller:

For those of you who listened to part one, you heard about a very long relationship between Greenberg Traurig and the East Harlem Tutorial Program and the breadth of work that Greenberg Traurig has done for the program. In total, there were 64 timekeepers, attorneys and staff who devoted their time to work on the East Harlem Tutorial Program projects.

Caroline Heller:

In particular, in addition to Steven Rabinowitz and his administrative assistant, Debbie Surette, we have to mention some other Greenberg Traurig attorneys who performed a significant amount of work. That's Randall Allen, Hal Beerman, Brandilyn Dumas, Nick Hawkins, David Jensen, John Mascialino, Glen Newman, Michael Pickett, Tianja Samuel, and India Sneed.

Caroline Heller:

So let's get into part two of the East Harlem Tutorial Program and Greenberg Traurig episode.

Caroline Heller:

So Jeff, can you tell us a little bit about the East Harlem community?

Jeff Ginsburg:

I think it's really important for a firm to be successful in a city to in fact have the information of what's going on and who lives in neighborhoods all around the city. And not only that, but to not just know the neighborhood by demographic data, which we can all look up and we can know, and yes, East Harlem, a majority of the residents there will self-identify as Latinx or Latino or Hispanic or Latina.

Jeff Ginsburg:

It wasn't historically. It's a neighborhood that's had many different actually immigration movements and waves. It was for a while known as Spanish Harlem, particularly because of influx from East Harlem and then Mexico and the Dominican Republic, but in fact, it had waves of European Jews, waves of Italians,

waves of various different immigrants over the years. And to [inaudible 00:02:59] point on it, but where we sit is, we were talking about this the other day, it's actually the original Wappinger tribe site, right? And it was New Amsterdam and it was native land as all the land was before we took it.

Jeff Ginsburg:

So I think there's an important history way back for sure and up until now, but what I think East Harlem is and what attracted me to it in many regards is it's also a community actually that is pretty stable in terms of demographic change. In fact, it has some of the least movement of people moving in and out of neighborhoods in the city. It is often not the first spot that new immigrants will land in the city, but maybe the second or the third [inaudible 00:03:44].

Jeff Ginsburg:

It also has about 65% of the housing units are subsidized units, either through NYCHA or other public housing units. And those have, when we took a look at it, and actually Greenberg helped us do this way back in the day, we know that the vast majority of those units are protected for at least another couple of decades, some even longer. And so we think they'll continue to be a stable population there of the nature of those policies in that housing structure.

Jeff Ginsburg:

East Harlem is also Tito Puente. 110th street, Tito Puente has an enormous history around music, which is a shared love of Stephen and I, and we've gotten some money through Love Rocks and there's been lots of ways that Greenberg Traurig supported. So we all care about music and there's a great music history in East Harlem. There's a great culinary history in East Harlem.

Jeff Ginsburg:

Hospitality is the main industry. It's the largest workforce industry in East Harlem. There are several others, but hospitality is the largest. I want to say it was around 30% that said they worked in hospitality, many work in healthcare as well. So obviously this pandemic with lack of hospitality events, restaurants, et cetera, has been brutal. East Harlem had dropped into the nearest single digit unemployment rate prior to the pandemic. And by all reports, we think it's somewhere between maybe 30 and 40% now, the unemployment rate, because so many of the jobs were in sectors that have been hit hard. We hope to see those come back.

Jeff Ginsburg:

East Harlem has a lot of working people. It also has a lot of people looking for jobs. It's also a growing in its younger population. Under 18 is the fastest growing group, and so we look to that.

Jeff Ginsburg:

So it's an incredibly diverse neighborhood and I don't just mean that from a sort of racial lens. I mean that from all walks of life, all experiences, origins, all perspectives.

Jeff Ginsburg:

And the last thing I would say is it's a neighborhood where many different education things have been tried. If you Google out there, you'll find lots of books about education things that were tried and started. It's like the small schools movement and various other things. But what you'll also find is that

decade after decade, the investments always fall short or no one will be consistent and sort of push through to really make something sustainable. And that's why, as Stephen said, with the HDP, we're going to serve 25% of all the public school students by 2025. We'll probably get to higher than that over time. And we're trying to build something that is sustainable, and also, frankly, that is run and owned and deliberated over by the community itself.

Jeff Ginsburg:

We have a growing alumni council and a growing presence of alumni and families in our boards and our decision-making positions. Nearly 80% of our staff identifies as people of color, the vast majority identifying as black and Latinx. And so we're trying to make sure that the voices that identify with and know the East Harlem community are authentic to that community, are taking the power or taking the decision and want a sustainable model to go forward.

Caroline Heller:

And Stephen, it sounds like the work that you and your team performed over the past 10 or something years is the same kind of work that you would do for any commercial client who is able to pay the firm rates, that the projects were just as complicated and involved just as much work and as many team members.

Stephen Rabinowitz:

Oh, I would say some aspects of the work were much more complicated than with regard to a for-profit, not only a for-profit client, but a for-profit owner. Part of it is where money comes from. When we raise money to build a building, it's not all coming from a straight ahead source, right? We're putting together a very complicated venture of some private money that's without strings, some private money that's tied to conditions, right? You raise X from here, but only if you raise Y from somewhere else, right? Then there's a variety of raising money from city and state sources, and that comes with a whole bunch of other requirements. Then you're not in the commercial financing market, or not in it exclusively.

Stephen Rabinowitz:

So I'd say those challenges and then getting all those pieces to work together I think provide some unique legal challenges that we don't necessarily face in a commercial transaction. And then there are a lot of issues about equity that we don't face, and I'm talking about emotional equity, not dollar and cents equity, in building a project, right? As sensitive as every project needs to be now from the perspective of employing community and minority and women-owned contractors and big businesses and employees, that is even more striking with EHTP, where we want to make sure that we're employing people from the community. We want to make sure that we're, to the extent we can, using community-based businesses as our partners in development.

Stephen Rabinowitz:

And those provide, I think, extra challenges. And fortunately, we're seeing a lot of those kinds of sensitivities work their way into the commercial world. But I think those of us who were involved in building and development in communities like East Harlem, I think we've been sensitive to it first and, and required to pay attention to it and not give it lip service, right? Not make it window dressing, but make it something that's front and center, a part of our project. Like building a project in East Harlem, but building it a hundred percent with outside money and outsiders and no community involvement is not something that you can brush off. It's not something that a PR executive can write a nice press

release about. We have to really walk the walk in the community that we serve. And I think that those aren't intangible challenges you have to face. Those are real challenges that we have to address in the legal work we do.

Jeff Ginsburg:

And I would add the first building, the first building was on time and under budget. And I wonder how many people in Manhattan can talk about their buildings as being on time and under budget. And that always matters, and I'm sure all of your clients care, but for a donor to know or for a community know that that allowed for every dollar then to go into something that really matters was crucial.

Jeff Ginsburg:

I would just also add on that whether it be Debbie, who's amazing in Stephen's office, or every person on the team, or Steven or whatever, we are treated in every small and big way behind the scenes, in front of the scenes, we get treated totally we feel like clients. In fact, I sometimes wish we had the lower responsiveness from everybody that we have from [inaudible 00:11:06] again.

Jeff Ginsburg:

And I think that that says a lot. I have never for one moment, and the team was saying this the other day, we've never felt like we've been put aside. We've never heard anybody [inaudible 00:11:18] and say, "Well, I'll get back to you, but I've got to get to this other paying thing first." I'm sure it is a balancer for everyone at the firm, but we're never treated that way. And I think that that is so important because that just speaks to the culture that we've been able to build together and obviously the culture at Greenberg, but I think it's also that there is a feeling of like a team and that the work really matters.

Jeff Ginsburg:

And I think that for anyone who's going to do pro bono work, and we have some other firms that help us on different things, not legal and real estate, it only works when that is really the feeling. It's not just like a nice-to-have. It actually does need to be that way if you want to get the work done really well. Because when you hit really difficult moments in a project, if the client paying or not is second class, it's just not going to work out. There's not going to be a trust there. There's not going to be momentum to solve the problem. And so the fact that we've been treated as sort of first-class customers, even with a \$0 ticket, it has been absolutely crucial and it's also made our team feel that Greenberg actually does want to do the thing. It's not just like a feel-good moment. They actually want to do the work well.

Caroline Heller:

That is something-

Stephen Rabinowitz:

Yeah, although-

Caroline Heller:

Go ahead, Stephen.

Stephen Rabinowitz:

Although this is going to create a problem. If some of our pain clients hear that our pro bono clients get the same service, they might not want to pay us either.

Jeff Ginsburg:

I'm sure Stephen is joking, but what I would say is that if a firm can execute with all the things that we've been through, and even without that particular motivation, right, it speaks volumes to the ability at the execution level, right? And I think that that has come up in our board world and come up in our supporters world of like, wow, just year after year, as this stuff gets even more complicated, it all gets handled and it all comes out really strong. And it's not singularly because we're writing this check, because we're not, it's that there's just a talent level and an ability and passion to do things well that sort of comes through.

Jeff Ginsburg:

And that's interesting because we've worked with firms where maybe one person is like that, right? Where someone on the team can do it and maybe they're dragging everybody, right, to the rest of it. But that's actually not true. The bench is very deep at Greenberg. And sort of Stephen mentioned people earlier, but we haven't worked with a single person in Greenberg that hasn't executed on their part at a high level, which means for us as the client, we don't have to be like, "Oh my God, Stephen can't be in this meeting. He can't micromanage this thing. It's all going to fall apart." No. No offense to Stephen, but things go well even when he's not there too.

Jeff Ginsburg:

And that's a good thing. That's the culture of the place and that's the level of execution. We just need him when the really the really big moments come in, but there's a lot of other people that are very capable.

Stephen Rabinowitz:

I think it's really noteworthy that Jeff mentioned Debbie, that would be Debbie Surette, my admin. I think that's really emblematic of how we try to run our business here. And we make it a point of telling everybody who's involved in working with our clients pro bono and otherwise that they are all part of the client experience and everyone in our team really buys into that. And the fact that you know my assistant's first name and the fact that you view your interaction with her as a positive, I think that's really important to our clients generally that that's the way we approach our client service model.

Stephen Rabinowitz:

And we spend a lot of time and energy at every level of the firm making sure that that that service mentality really comes through in what we do. And in terms of me not being necessary at every point, I mean, that's the ideal. It really is the ideal. We, as a lot of organizations, business and otherwise, are always talking about succession and who are we building this for? And to that extent, I think Greenberg Traurig and EHTP are very similar in that we're very focused on building an enterprise and having an enterprise that's going to survive those of us who are in positions of influence right now.

Stephen Rabinowitz:

In my community, the community of my firm, I mean, what I'm concerned about is that the people that I've trained and mentored over the years have a viable business to take over when I retire and my

contemporaries retire. And I think with EHTP, you see the same thing. You see an organization that's been around for 60 years. This isn't someone's flavor of the month. This is something that has been passed down from generation to generation. And I think it's really, really inspiring for me. And I think one of the reasons that so many of the people that work on EHTP matters in our firm are it gets so committed to it is they see that. They see that this is something that's been important to people and has a real impact on a community for decades now? And I think there's a commitment among our people to say, "Hey, I want to make sure that this thing is viable and strong for generations after me."

Caroline Heller:

Well, one of the things, Stephen, that I appreciate about you and so many of our partners at the firm is that you just don't talk the talk, you walk the walk. You are a model to the associates for taking pro bono work as seriously as you do the commercial work. And it's very important at law firms that associates have those types of models so they can be told, "You need to take this as seriously as your commercial matters. These pro bono clients are just as important," but if they don't see the senior people doing it, it doesn't resonate. And so I'm so grateful for you and your team that you've been doing that, especially in the New York office.

Jeff Ginsburg:

I wanted this end by going back to the beginning, which is for those young associates who you mentioned at Greenberg Traurig, for those partners who you mentioned who are trying to inspire, that I would just add, as that head of an organization myself, we've got about 300 people, and this is not extra in that young talent and top talent, actually, if you look at surveys, are demanding this of their firms and they're even leaving firms over not doing good work, not actually paying attention to issues in their cities that they work, that they don't have those connections. And also, we see in the research time and time again, that if people find meaning from their work place, they actually work better. They do a better job. They produce better outcomes. They make more money. They're more committed to the organization. They stay longer.

Jeff Ginsburg:

So it is one of those things of sort of doing well by doing good, as they say. So it's a great advantage of both doing the right thing and actually hearing your talent and what they want to do. And I've just said to people, if you don't focus on issues of equity, if you don't focus on issues of community engagement, if you don't focus on issues of sort of making the world a better place in your firm, your firm won't end up a part of that place. It will just go away. It's where the future is. It's where it's going. And so it's just a requirement beyond us also as being the right thing to do and the right thing that is owed. And it's just sort of this imperfect union that we're trying to make better every day.

Stephen Rabinowitz:

We're kidding ourselves if we think that the people that work with us, our colleagues, our associates, our staff are getting all the fulfillment in their lives from what they do our clients, right? That's super important. It's what keeps the roofs over our heads, but there is a strong need I think that people have to be part of a community. I think that in the past year we see it with people just picking up and leaving New York. I think that we're seeing our community fracture quite a bit.

Stephen Rabinowitz:

And not only that, I think we're seeing people make decisions in their lives that are based solely on, I can't say solely, but in a lot of cases on convenience without necessarily a deep regard for the communities where they live and work and the importance of community to bringing fulfillment and happiness to your life. I hope that as we continue to create relationships like this between our firm and EHTP, and particularly I think that's why it's so that we get back together and start working together, but I think it's important that people feel the firm's commitment to community. And I think we'll all feel better about ourselves if we do that.

Caroline Heller:

Well, thank you, Jeff and Stephen. Those were extremely inspiring words and I think extremely pertinent for this period of time when creating communities and reaching across to each other and being present for each other and supporting each other. The importance of that cannot be overstated and I really appreciate you both being on, so thank you.

Stephen Rabinowitz:

Great. Thank you, Caroline. Thanks, Jeff.

Jeff Ginsburg:

Thanks. See you.

Stephen Rabinowitz:

See you all soon.

Jeff Ginsburg:

Thank you. See you.

Caroline Heller:

Thanks.

Jeff Ginsburg:

Bye.

Caroline Heller:

Bye.

Caroline Heller:

Thank you for listening to Greenberg Traurig's pro bono podcast Good in Practice. I'm your host, Caroline Heller, litigation shareholder in the New York office and chair of Greenberg Traurig's Global Pro bono Program.

Caroline Heller:

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This transcript was exported on Mar 29, 2021 - view latest version [here](#).

Caroline Heller:

I hope you enjoyed this episode and I hope that you join us in two weeks for another pro bono story.