

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](#)):

The Make-A-Wish Foundation is an organization that grants life-changing wishes to children battling critical illnesses. It traces its roots back to a little seven-year-old boy named Christopher James Greicius. Christopher was battling leukemia and he wished to be a police officer. So in 1980 his Phoenix community came together and made his wish come true. This event inspired the creation of the Make-A-Wish Foundation. Tens of thousands of volunteers, donors, and supporters advanced the Make-A-Wish mission to grant a wish to every child diagnosed with a critical illness. In the U.S. and its territories a wish is granted every 34 minutes. For children with critical illnesses the act of making a wish and having it come true does more than just buoy the spirits of the child. It also buoys the volunteers, donors, sponsors, medical personnel and the community that the child comes from. It can also help energize parents, give them a feeling of optimism as they support their child through treatment.

Caroline Heller ([01:32](#)):

In 2020 through 2021 GT Attorneys and staff in different departments and offices helped the Make-A-Wish Foundation of Florida find its home. On today's episode of Good In Practice, three of the team members tell the story about how GT assisted Make-A-Wish of Southern Florida, and one of them describes her personal connection to the Make-A-Wish Foundation. I would love to have each of you introduce yourselves first and tell us a little bit about your practice at Greenberg Traurig. Iris, do you want to start?

Iris Escarra ([02:04](#)):

Thank you for the opportunity. My name is Iris Escarra, and I'm a shareholder in the Miami office of Greenberg Traurig. I'm a co-chair of the global practice group and land development, and I've been with the firm 16 years now. It seems like just yesterday I left the City of Miami as an assistant city attorney and joined Greenberg to practically do the same thing I did. But now I do it on behalf of private clients coming into the City of Miami and developing. So I have the opportunity and the pleasure of representing many developers in the City of Miami, including the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

Caroline Heller ([02:36](#)):

Danielle, how about you?

Danielle Gonzalez ([02:39](#)):

Hi, I'm Danielle Gonzalez. I've been with the firm for 17 years now. I am a shareholder in the real estate department in the Miami office. And I am also on the board of directors for Make-A-Wish Southern Florida, which I love participating with in my free time. With Greenberg I focus on handling real estate acquisitions, dispositions, leaseings and financing of properties of all asset classes, not just in South Florida, but all over the country, from California to New York.

Caroline Heller ([03:14](#)):

And Devon, could you introduce yourself.

Devon Vickers ([03:17](#)):

Sure, my name is Devon Vickers. I am a fourth year associate here in the Miami office and I work in the land development practice group with Iris, and my practice primarily focuses on mid-scale to large scale mixed use development, commercial and residential developments throughout Miami-Dade County, including North Miami, North Miami Beach, Miami Beach and also I had the opportunity to work in City of Miami on this wonderful project with Make-A-Wish and Iris.

Caroline Heller ([03:53](#)):

Obviously that's why we're here is to talk about Greenberg Traurig's work with the Make-A-Wish foundation. So I'd like to throw it out to the group. How did you learn about the opportunity to help Make-A-Wish, and why don't you tell us a little bit about what help they needed?

Danielle Gonzalez ([04:09](#)):

So I'll take this. I joined the board of directors of Make-A-Wish a little over four years ago. And at my very first board meeting one of the topics of discussion was that Make-A-Wish of Southern Florida was looking to not only relocate their headquarters, but also to build a wish house. And this would be a building whose central purpose would be to uplift children and families during the wish discovery process, and also provide space for volunteer and donor events, as well as housing the organization's administrative offices. When I heard this at the meeting, some of the other board members were talking about their roles in the process of identifying a location for the wish house, as well as fundraising for this effort.

Danielle Gonzalez ([05:13](#)):

And I immediately realized that a number of board members were so excited about this process and deeply involved with it in terms of identifying a site as well as the design process. So shortly after that meeting, I approached Norm Wedderburn, who is our CEO, and I told him that I would love to be involved in any way possible with this process. Given that I am a real estate attorney, it seemed like it would be a natural fit. And he immediately took me up on the offer. And shortly after that I reached out to Cesar Alvarez and a number of other GT leaders and sought their blessing to put together a team of attorneys at GT who could assist Make-A-Wish with this endeavor.

Caroline Heller ([06:11](#)):

I am sure that Cesar had no problem saying yes, that would seem like a no-brainer.

Danielle Gonzalez ([06:16](#)):

No problem at all. And I should note, it wasn't just Cesar, but also Matt Gorson, Jaret Davis, Sarah Bower, I reached out to probably 10 affirmed leaders because I knew this was quite a large undertaking. And within a few minutes of making the request, I received an overwhelming number of yes responses to the request.

Caroline Heller ([06:42](#)):

Yeah, the team in Florida, the leaders in Florida are extremely responsive and extremely supportive. Danielle, could you tell us a little bit, and you mentioned that they needed help with headquarters and make a wish house. Why don't you tell us a little about ... I think, a lot of people have heard about the Make-A-Wish foundation and may believe they have an understanding about what it does, but for

anybody who doesn't know or to clarify any information people have, can you tell us a little bit about the Make-A-Wish foundation and what a Make-A-Wish houses is?

Danielle Gonzalez ([07:14](#)):

Sure. So Make-A-Wish is A 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that was founded in the spring of 1980. It's been around for many years and it helps to fulfill the wishes of children with critical illnesses between the ages of two and a half and 18 years old. Once a child is identified as qualifying to receive a wish, a group of volunteers meets with that child to help them formulate their greatest wish. And in most chapters across the country, and there are over 50 chapters of Make-A-Wish. So we are representing Make-A-Wish of Southern Florida, which is one of the largest chapters in the country, and one of the chapters that grants the greatest number of wishes every year. So once a child is identified as being eligible for a wish, volunteers meet with that child like I said to help them formulate their ideal wish.

Danielle Gonzalez ([08:25](#)):

And generally those volunteers meet with the child at their home or at an office building. The idea of creating a wish house is that it will be a very special, magical place for this child to come to, to meet with the Make-A-Wish volunteers, start their wish creation journey. And so they will come to the house, they will help to formulate their greatest wish, and then the volunteers will make this into a reality.

Caroline Heller ([09:03](#)):

So it sounds like the location of the headquarters and the Make-A-Wish house are very important to the organization's mission.

Danielle Gonzalez ([09:11](#)):

Yes, absolutely.

Caroline Heller ([09:13](#)):

So then I don't know Danielle, or Iris, if you want to jump in, why don't you tell us about what happened next? What were the next steps after we got approval to move forward and represent Make-A-Wish on a pro bono basis and to help them with their project?

Iris Escarra ([09:28](#)):

The search began for the right site for them. They looked at a couple of different sites in different locations where they were trying to either partner with local government or acquire the property, and we researched a couple of different sites that they were considering. Ultimately the site that they purchased also needed a rezoning in order to allow for the office use throughout the whole building that they were proposing. So the zoning for the site that they were under contract for needed to occur prior to the closing in order to make sure that the proposed use was going to be allowed at the site. So we represented them in an application that went before the Planning, Zoning & Appeals Board of the City of Miami, as well as two other public hearings before the city commission. It entailed various different neighborhood meetings and groups and reaching out and discussing with folks in the area about what was coming.

Iris Escarra ([10:23](#)):

It was really a great location. There's another nonprofit, the Young Women's Community Association is right next door to it. So it was a great location for them to build the South Florida chapter headquarters there. So not only will they house their offices there, but they also will be able to grant wishes there, which is really a magical experience for the children.

Caroline Heller ([10:46](#)):

And the rezoning application was approved. What other steps did Greenberg Traurig take to help facilitate the headquarters being at this location and the Make-A-Wish house being at this location?

Iris Escarra ([10:59](#)):

So from the development side we helped them with the rezoning to allow for the uses that they were proposing. We've helped them with the site plan approval, meeting the actual review and approval of the building in and of itself. We've helped them with preparing the site for building permit. There's some covenants and some unity of titles that are required in order to be able to develop across the various different platted lots. So we've helped them with that end. In addition to that we also have some work to do with regards to their tree permits and other items that are coming up that we're still in the works. So we got the rezoning, but we're still working through a bunch of other items with them. So it's an ongoing effort.

Caroline Heller ([11:37](#)):

How much longer do you think it'll take before the mission is accomplished for Make-A-Wish?

Iris Escarra ([11:44](#)):

From the development side the mission's accomplished when they're able to go in and use the building, which will probably be another year and a half. So we typically assist all the way throughout the whole process so they get their certificate of occupancy and certificate of use. So during construction sometimes things come up that our team helps them with. When they're trying to pass the inspections at the end, our team comes in and helps them with that. So we're a partner along the whole way.

Caroline Heller ([12:08](#)):

Now, Iris, I'm not an expert in real estate by any stretch of the imagination. So I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about what you've done with Make-A-Wish to date, is this similar to the level of difficulty of work that you would have with any paying client in helping them find a location, deal with rezoning? Was there anything that was easier? Was there anything that was harder? Can you just tell us a little bit about what the experience is like, if it's different at all, when you're doing it for a pro bono client?

Iris Escarra ([12:42](#)):

No the process is still the same. We still have to go through the same procedures with the city. We still have to go through and prepare the same documentation as we would with any other client. So the process was the same. I can tell you the Make-A-Wish folks are a fun group to be a part of. So that did make it a little bit smoother because they're just a jolly group. But otherwise the process is still the same and going through all the steps are still the same.

Caroline Heller ([13:09](#)):

And were there any particular challenges that you faced in as you move forward with this process?

Iris Escarra ([13:15](#)):

Well, initially when we were trying to find the location we did have a bit of a challenge in trying to find the right spot that had all the different components that they wanted for the particular wish house. However, with this particular site that they finally selected, it was a lot smoother than some of the previous ones. Because some of the previous ones entailed an agreement with a local government agency that required a referendum. It was a little bit more complex. That one didn't come to fruition, but sometimes things happen for a reason. They were able to come and find this location. And then this location was able to ... We were able to quickly put together what was the map that they needed to be able to get their office built here and accomplish it.

Caroline Heller ([13:56](#)):

And approximately how many Greenberg Traurig attorneys and staff did you have working on the Make-A-Wish project?

Danielle Gonzalez ([14:02](#)):

We had more than 16, [inaudible 00:14:06] attorneys, paralegals and staff working on the project, or a grand total of more than 500 pro bono hours. That was as of January of this year, so it's probably higher at this point. So from a general real estate perspective we assisted Make-A-Wish with the contract negotiations, with all of the due diligence for the site. And we also assisted them with negotiating a loan to acquire the property. Then we also had folks involved from our construction group who assisted and are continuing to assist Make-A-Wish with the negotiation of various construction contracts to build and develop the property. At one point we had members of our tax team involved as well, since Make-A-Wish is a 501(c)(3) organization. We had two members of our tax team advising on tax specific issues. And at one point in time we even were considering a public financing option, and so we had members of our public financing team involved.

Devon Vickers ([15:27](#)):

This really was effort. And this is probably one of the projects where I worked with so many different attorneys and staff within the GP [inaudible 00:15:39] in the office. And I know it's just me here, but even within our land development team, because I was a junior associate, there were so many other associates and paralegals that I was able to talk to or contact whenever I had questions. So this really was an all hands on deck team effort between land development and real estate.

Caroline Heller ([16:01](#)):

Well, it is one of the great things about Greenberg Traurig, while it feels overwhelming to know that there are 2,000 or so attorneys in many, many, many, many offices in the U.S. and around the world, it's easy to find someone in our offices who knows about whatever legal issue comes up in a project. And Devon I'd love to hear from you because I do hear from associates frequently that they're concerned it will interfere with their billable work, or maybe they won't find something in their specialty. Can you tell us a little bit about your experience working on this case while also juggling your billable cases?

Devon Vickers ([16:38](#)):

As a land use and or land development associate pro bono assignments that come along is very rare and far and few in between that you get a land use type of assignment. Usually the ones we see come through are more geared towards litigation. And so I was really fortunate to kind of work on this project from my beginning as a junior associate here at GT. And so that was a breath of fresh air for me. So when I heard about the pro bono requirement, I didn't have to worry about that, because one, I knew that this was generating a lot of work and that this type of rezoning application was a lot of work. And two, that it was in the area that I specialize in and that I do a lot of work in. And so I didn't have to worry about that, one, from a pro bono perspective, but also as a land use and zoning associate. So this was really the most ideal situation for myself.

Caroline Heller ([17:41](#)):

And Devon, I also understand that you have a special relationship with the Make-A-Wish Foundation, and I'd love for you to tell your story.

Devon Vickers ([17:51](#)):

Sure. And I mean, that was probably the third prong in what made working with Iris and Danielle and making this wish house comes to fruition was that working on this assignment really kind of brought things full circle for me. Because in 2001 I was diagnosed with leukemia as an 11-year-old kid. And a couple of years later, fortunately, I went into remission. And during that time I didn't know, but my nurses and oncologists recommended me to the Make-A-Wish South Florida chapter as a child with critical illness. And so kind of like Danielle talked about earlier, I had the experience where the Make-A-Wish staff actually came to my house and interviewed both me and my parents. And we just kind of talked about what I like, my experience with leukemia, but more so they really just focused on me as an everyday kid and type of celebrities I like, the hobbies that I like.

Devon Vickers ([18:55](#)):

And so working on this project and knowing what my Make-A-Wish process kind of looked like, and not that it was inferior in any way, but working through this process and seeing kind of the amazing renderings of what that Make-A-Wish house is going to look like, I could only imagine if I was an 11 or 12 year old kid, and I had the opportunity to kind of go through that process at that wish house, which is kind of, even though they have offices there, it's kind of geared towards kids. And so if I had that experience, I could just imagine that my world of possibilities, even though I had a great wish in meeting former President Bill Clinton, I can just imagine that just the building and the wish house itself kind of just barks creativity and really opens up the realm of possibilities for kids.

Devon Vickers ([19:47](#)):

And so I was really happy to work on this project because I was able to not only get experience with working in City of Miami and working with Iris, but in really putting my personal touch and knowing that not only was it a project, but it was a project for an organization like Make-A-Wish that gave so much to me when I was a kid. And so when Iris asked me to join and working with this project, it was a no-brainer. I think my answer was absolutely yes. Just because it meant something that I could give, even if it was something very small and helping Iris with this rebuilding, that I could give something to this organization that gave so much to not only me, but my family. Because something Danielle also said earlier is that Make-A-Wish, the purpose of Make-A-Wish is to help children with critical illnesses.

Devon Vickers ([20:40](#)):

But I think one misperception that the general public has about Make-A-Wish is that they're granting wishes for dying kids. And so that's also why it has such a personal message for me, because I survived and I'm not only a cancer survivor, but in working with Make-A-Wish, and I volunteered with them in college and even now, I'm able to help Make-A-Wish put a face with those children that have critical illnesses as an adult. So I'm able to share my story and how Make-A-Wish helped me and my family when I was a kid, and just put a different face as a healthy adult and not the general misconception of just dying kids, which I think puts a different kind of stamp on it for Make-A-Wish that they do so much more than what they're known for, and provide so much hope than really what you see.

Caroline Heller ([21:40](#)):

I appreciate you clarifying that. And I think that's really important. Just from a personal point of view, what did it feel like when you were a youngster and your wish was made possible to meet President Clinton?

Devon Vickers ([21:52](#)):

Well, it was great. I thought it was a joke. I did even once they told me that President Clinton agreed to meet me and my family, I literally did not believe it until we stepped into his office. Part of my wish was not just to meet President Clinton, but this is when his offices, this was after his tenure as president and he had offices in Harlem, New York. And so we went to Harlem, but I also got to see like a Broadway play and go to the Statue of Liberty. So all of that, like before even meeting President Clinton was an experience within itself. Because I had never been to New York. And so being in this major international city and seeing things like Statue of Liberty and going on Broadway, that could have been a wish in and of itself.

Devon Vickers ([22:53](#)):

And so I was just happy with that component. And so actually meeting, stepping into his office and meeting President Clinton was just, I was on cloud nine. And even though I was on cloud nine, I think my parents were more so on cloud nine than I was. But it was, from the minute we left our front door to the minute that we got to New York and we met President Clinton, I will say that even though meeting him with awesome, what really made that experience great was the Make-A-Wish staffer that I had during that trip that was with us every step of the way. And so that's another kind of internal component that a lot of people don't see on the outside and what makes Make-A-Wish so great. It's not just the actual wish that makes so great, but it's their staff.

Devon Vickers ([23:47](#)):

And so my particular staff person called and talked to us before the trip, was with us every step of the trip, When I was nervous, got me some water before we stepped into President Clinton's office. And I think that is a true kind of sign of the type of organization that Make-A-Wish is. And I could not be more just grateful for that wish, but for their staff and even their President CEO Norm Wedderburn has been a constant kind of figure in my life since that wish. Since I was in college, when I was a pre-law student, he agreed to meet with me just to talk about stuff about law that I had no idea, at that point I had no idea I even want to practice in big law, and Norm took the time out to talk to me.

Devon Vickers ([24:40](#)):

So it just goes to show just the quality of people that work for Make-A-Wish. For them this isn't just a job. This is really like a way of life. And they really believe in the type of work that they're doing. And so

just to kind of tie it together and bring it full circle, it really, again, was no problem for me. I didn't give it a second thought to work on this project, because again, we usually don't have the opportunity to, other than saying thank you, to really give back to the people or to be organizations that really have paved the way and given so much to us. And so for me this was the rare opportunity I had to kind of show them through physical action and work that I was truly, truly appreciative for everything that they had done for me.

Caroline Heller ([25:30](#)):

Wow, Devon, thank you for sharing that. I mean, not only is it an extremely moving story, but to hear that the Make-A-Wish foundation not only has this investment in making a child's wish come true, but then may stay in contact with them, for them to see that you then became an attorney who turned around and helped them it must be just an incredibly mutually moving experience for everybody involved. And I'm sure in turn means the world to them as well. Well, Iris, Danielle, Devon, thank you so much for being here today. And I hope that a year and a half from now we can have a follow-up, a celebratory podcast about Make-A-Wish moving into their new headquarters.

Danielle Gonzalez ([26:14](#)):

We can even do a little movie of all of us walking into the building and all that good stuff. I told you there's re [crosstalk 00:26:24]. I'm happy to have a movie.

Caroline Heller ([26:28](#)):

Thanks for joining 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. On today's episode of Good in Practice you heard from Iris Escarra, a shareholder and co-chair of Miami land development and zoning practice. Danielle Gonzalez, a shareholder in the real estate department of the Miami office, and Devon Vickers and associates in the real estate department of the Miami office. Thanks for listening today. And I hope that you tune in, in two weeks or another pro bono story.