

Caroline Heller: [00:05](#) 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. On today's episode of Good in Practice, I interview LaQuenta Rudison. LaQuenta is an associate in our Chicago office and she works in the corporate department. Her practice focuses on mergers and acquisitions. In general, corporate matters. For example, she advises public and private companies on various transactional matters, including domestic and cross border mergers and acquisitions and reorganizations.

Caroline Heller: [00:43](#) LaQuenta also has a pro bono practice where she provides corporate advice to non-profits. I love all of my interviews for Good in Practice because I get to have a conversation with someone about something that they're passionate in. And oftentimes I know the people that I'm interviewing, but I learn something new about them during the interview. LaQuenta I'd never met before, and our first conversation before we recorded the podcast was really interesting and stayed with me. Everyone does pro bono for a different reason.

Caroline Heller: [01:14](#) Most people are motivated because they're passionate about a particular issue, and typically that passion comes from a life experience. Quite often, that life experience is painful and most people don't like talking about it. But LaQuenta, like me, is an open book about why she does pro bono. LaQuenta and I also touched on the issue of cultural competency in pro bono representation and how important it is.

Caroline Heller: [01:39](#) Now, I could do an entire episode on cultural competency and pro bono representation, and maybe I will, but for the purposes of my brief discussion with LaQuenta about this, cultural competency simply means the ability to understand and work effectively with people from different backgrounds and different cultures. And typically when you're doing a pro bono case, most attorneys are working with a client who comes from a different background or a different culture. LaQuenta is an example of how an attorney can combine their area of expertise with their passion to do good work.

Caroline Heller: [02:15](#) LaQuenta, thanks for joining us today. I was hoping that we could start with you telling us a little bit about yourself.

LaQuenta Rudiso...: [02:21](#) Thanks for having me. I am honored to be a part of such an organization that is dedicated to giving back. I want to make sure that people know that I'm gracious for that and nothing but gratitude for everybody who supported me in my pro bono

efforts here at the firm. I am a fifth year associate at Greenberg Traurig. I do corporate work in the mergers and acquisitions area. I'm representing buyers and sellers in all types of industries and at all levels, whether it's a strategic buyer, seller, or private equity. What I do in the pro bono area is really close to my story about who I am.

LaQuenta Rudiso...: [03:16](#)

I am from the South Side of Chicago. I did not grow up with a lot, and I saw a lot of things that maybe most children didn't see growing up. I went to school in local schools and went to a Whitney Young High School. I was fortunate to have support getting into that school. Went away to college and just worked regular jobs after college and made my way to law school. By the time I got to law school, I was seasoned. Still young, but seasoned. I was working in the morning and going to school at night.

LaQuenta Rudiso...: [04:01](#)

I knew that from my previous career, I was a mortgage insurance underwriter, that I wanted to stay in the corporate area, but I also knew that I wanted to do something that made sure my neighborhood was okay, even if I left. For me, that is providing corporate type services. That's what I do as my billable work, but I try to tie that in with my pro bono work too by limiting my practice to corporate matters.

LaQuenta Rudiso...: [04:35](#)

What I do in the area of pro bono work is assist founders with forming nonprofit organizations or incorporating nonprofit organizations and helping them obtain federal tax exemption under the internal revenue code section 501c3. Most of these organizations that come to me tend to be based in my neighborhood, working in my old neighborhood, I should say, because now I live in the suburbs. They're familiar to me. I can have conversations with them about things that they're working on, and I know firsthand what it's like for the children and the women that they're helping.

LaQuenta Rudiso...: [05:18](#)

It's mostly children or women that these organizations are focused on. That kind of wasn't on purpose. I started the first one. I had a friend who had just started an organization that's in its 11th year now and she asked me for her help. And at first I refused. I'm like, "I'm trying to learn my job. I can't help you." She's like, "You're my friend. You have to help me." So I helped her, and then that just turned into a love for doing it. When I work with these organizations, I'm not just providing them legal advice.

- LaQuenta Rudiso...: [05:50](#) Sometimes they come to me because they've been taken advantage of by a company that purports to help organizations get federal tax exemption. You look at their paperwork and you see it's all wrong, or they found out it was wrong because a big grant giving organization told them that it was wrong and they lost the grant because of it. You're hearing people break down crying because they feel like they can't help the folks that they want to help because they didn't get the help that they needed to make sure that their organization incorporated correctly and obtain tax exemption.
- LaQuenta Rudiso...: [06:31](#) Everything that I do in that area speaks volumes about where I came from and who I am. It's easy to do the work because of that.
- Caroline Heller: [06:42](#) Can you tell me a little bit about the organizations that you've performed this work for? What are their missions and how do they help the community in the South Side of Chicago?
- LaQuenta Rudiso...: [06:53](#) Typically the organizations are focused on providing youth programs, educational programs, diverting youth from being in the streets having nothing to do to going to an organized program where they're interacting with other children their age, and they're seeing role models. They're going on trips to see what people in different professions do. There's one particular organization. They took their... It was quite boring for most of the children who went on this trip, but one child was very interested to go see an insurance company to see what an underwriter does.
- Caroline Heller: [07:34](#) Wow. That is unusual.
- LaQuenta Rudiso...: [07:37](#) It was very unusual, and the organization was just starting out. I had to use my connects in order to get the trip started because I used to do insurance underwriting. We provided the children lunch and things like that, but it was only one child was interested in becoming an insurance underwriter, and that child is now a teenager and is taking accounting classes.
- Caroline Heller: [08:03](#) Wow. That's impressive.
- LaQuenta Rudiso...: [08:05](#) Yeah. The organizations are mostly geared towards helping youth stay on the right path. There's other organizations as well that provide women with services as far as job training. Not necessarily women who are victims of domestic violence, but that's typically the types of women who go to those types of organizations, women who have nothing. They're exiting a

terrible situation. They need job training. They may need clothing to go on interviews like business suits and things like that. They may need socialization skills. There's one organization that I helped recently.

LaQuenta Rudiso...: [08:46](#) They actually provide a retreat, an all expense paid retreat, to teach women health and wellness techniques and talk to them about testing, annual physicals, and things like that, medical testing that they should do to take care of themselves.

Caroline Heller: [09:04](#) LaQuenta, can you tell me a little bit about how... You talked a little bit about growing up in South Side of Chicago. Can you tell me about how your experiences as a child growing up in the South Side inform the pro bono work that you chose to do? Because obviously you could volunteer at a clinic. There are lots of different opportunities for you. What drove you to this pro bono work in particular?

LaQuenta Rudiso...: [09:31](#) I just remember how it felt to be left out. I think most humans sympathize with folks who grow up in a certain type of condition, whether it's in Virginia, Tennessee, or Chicago, Illinois, or New York. I think most people have some kind of place in their heart. It just pulls on their heart strings. And I get emotional when I see a child go without or they see neglect or violence and things like that. But when you experience it firsthand, I always say, you can either end up like the environment that you see, or you work so hard to get away from it that you become 180 degrees different from it.

LaQuenta Rudiso...: [10:17](#) That was me. I saw a lot of things that I did not want to become. I did not want to have drug addiction issues. I did not want to had to lean on other people in the community and couch surf, if you will. I didn't want to end up in prison. There are a lot of folks I know who are still there and didn't make it out of the neighborhood, if you will. My upbringing informs me... Those problems still exist, right? Those problems still exist in the community that I grew up in. You can gentrify. You can put a Whole Foods. You can put a Starbucks, but the problem still exist.

LaQuenta Rudiso...: [11:00](#) The folks can just move around and those problems are still there. Because of my background, I know how to talk to them and they receive it. It's different hearing advice from someone who's never been through your situation than hearing it from someone who knows firsthand what you're going through. And then you can also have... Like some of these founders, they come to me and... Some of the things that they do are not in

line with what the IRS requires, for instance, for a public charity. They make these decisions and they're emotional because they want to help everybody that they can.

LaQuenta Rudiso...: [11:43](#) But me with my background, I feel like I can talk sternly to them and I can just say something along the lines, "Listen, I know what that is. I've been there, but you can not risk your entire status, your tax exempt status, because you are emotionally tied to one person." They receive it from me because I've been through it. You know, I've had a family that's gone through the situations that these folks are going through themselves sometimes, because sometimes founders...

LaQuenta Rudiso...: [12:14](#) I have one founder who I just ended the engagement now because I did everything she needed me to do, but I could talk to her and she received it, because she knew that I grew up in a certain kind of area. She felt comfortable divulging a lot of things to me. She felt comfortable taking advice from me.

Caroline Heller: [12:34](#) It's really interesting that you're talking about that, about giving back to the community that you came from and the community that you came from being able to receive your advice versus somebody who isn't from that community coming in and trying to provide legal advice. I see that as a movement in not only commercial work, but in pro bono work, having cultural competency.

Caroline Heller: [12:57](#) Not to discourage anyone from doing pro bono work in a neighborhood in which they didn't grow up, because we don't want to do that, but there's something to be said about having a sensitivity that you might not know the nuances of a neighborhood, that people might be suspicious of you because you aren't from where they're from. And by the same token, if you give back to the community which you're from, you do have that advantage because you can talk about having been there and grown up.

Caroline Heller: [13:22](#) For example, when I started doing pro bono work, it was important for me to do the pro bono work in the Bronx, one, because that was where I came from and I wanted to give back to the community. But two, I knew the Bronx. I knew the neighborhoods. I knew the areas, and I felt like that added to my relationships with my clients in the family court cases I was doing.

Caroline Heller: [13:42](#) But I'm really glad that you talked about that because it is something that our attorneys and pro bono attorneys need to

be aware of when they enter a situation, when they represent somebody who they might not understand their experience. And like I said, it's not that you can't do pro bono work in that area, but to be aware that you need to listen to the person you're representing because they are coming from a situation that you might not be familiar with. I'm really glad that you brought that up.

Caroline Heller: [14:10](#)

Something that's also really interesting is that when attorneys think about pro bono work, our attorneys, attorneys in other law firms, they're always worried if they're a transactional attorney that they can't do pro bono work. People think pro bono work and they think of representing women in domestic violence cases and getting protective orders or immigration cases or criminal justice cases. Tell me a little bit about were you ever worried that you couldn't give back in the area in which you practice commercially, or did you just know that there would be room for you to do this on a pro bono basis?

LaQuenta Rudiso...: [14:42](#)

Oh, it was a long cobblestone path. I will tell you that. I knew I wanted to do something in my previous firm to give back. I was too new to be able to articulate what exactly it was I would do that wouldn't interfere with my full-time job, my billable practice, if you want to call it that. The first pro bono matter that I took on was an employment discrimination case, and the partner on the case was a member of the trial bar. She got assigned to represent the plaintiff in the matter. The plaintiff was suing the state for employment discrimination.

LaQuenta Rudiso...: [15:31](#)

I did the discovery. I helped with the discovery. Attended the settlement conference. We went back and forth to court several times. It really took that experience. I mean, it was rewarding in the end, even though I didn't get to see how the case ended as I ended up switching firms. It was rewarding to be able to feel like I was helping somebody. Pro bono clients are... I just always feel like they're just so grateful for the help.

Caroline Heller: [16:07](#)

Yes.

LaQuenta Rudiso...: [16:07](#)

The client was always, "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." Saying thank you every five seconds. She was so grateful. I just knew I couldn't be in a courtroom. I couldn't. I've been told a lot that I would make a great litigator, but I don't feel like I would.

Caroline Heller: [16:28](#)

First of all, I think that you would, because you're very expressive and passionate, but I do understand that a lot of

transactional attorneys say they could never imagine themselves in court. And similarly, I could never imagine myself as a transactional attorney because I love the courtroom. I didn't mean to interrupt. Continue about how you realized you could use your skills to do pro bono work.

- LaQuenta Rudiso...: [16:53](#) Oh yes. My friend came along, like I said before, and she had asked me to help. I'm like, "I can't help you. That's not what I want to do," or whatever. She's like, "Oh, you're not a good friend." The conversation didn't really go like that.
- Caroline Heller: [17:09](#) It did in your head. She would probably have a different version.
- LaQuenta Rudiso...: [17:13](#) Exactly. She twisted my arm and I helped her. I'm like, "Oh, this is what I'm supposed to be doing, and this is how I make an impact." These organizations are out there on the ground every day. You might not see the results of your work, of their efforts anyway, as soon as you get that IRS determination letter. But if you keep in touch, you'll see... Like my friend's organization, I lost count of how many girls she's sent away to college. Every year she has like a graduation ceremony for them where she sends down a way to college with trunk items.
- LaQuenta Rudiso...: [17:56](#) Some of these girls can't afford to even go to college, right? They go there and they don't have a place to stay sometimes. She pulls from her organization's donors and she says, "Listen, we need to get up maybe \$3,000 to help so-and-so stay in her apartment so she can finish school." So if you stick with it, you see the results. I don't do the work because I want to feel a rewarding sense. I do the work because I genuinely want to give back that. That's all I want to do. The sense that I feel, the good feelings I get after the work is done, that's a bonus, but that's not why I do the work.
- LaQuenta Rudiso...: [18:37](#) It's good to see that, how they progressed and how they flourished after they did the help that they need to get started. It's a nice compliment to what transactional practice. I mean, you could do maybe one of these a month and feel empowered to do more because the work is just that doggone good. I really like doing it.
- Caroline Heller: [19:04](#) That's obvious. I know you've done it for I think... Do you know how many organizations you've helped? Well, how long have you been at Greenberg Traurig?
- LaQuenta Rudiso...: [19:12](#) I've only been at GT for a year now. It's been a little over a year.

- Caroline Heller: [19:16](#) Yeah, I knew that you are fairly. How many organizations do you think you've helped in that time?
- LaQuenta Rudiso...: [19:21](#) Oh, more than 10, because I have some organizations that I just talk to from time to time and don't provide... You don't provide legal services. They just come in to ask you... They're coming to you for emotional support. I just see that there's like so much out there that I could... There are so many organizations out there that want to get started and you just don't have time. You don't have enough hours in a day.
- Caroline Heller: [19:48](#) No. But I was talking to somebody else at our firm today about this, because she does unaccompanied minors immigration cases, and she remarked to me that she was sorry she couldn't do more. She only had six pro bono cases now. I was like, "You know what? You make a difference for one child, that is enough. You have changed somebody's life." You've only done 10 cases, or you've helped 10 organizations. That's amazing, and you'll have time to do a lot more, because you can't save the world. You can just help save one person at a time.
- Caroline Heller: [20:20](#) One of the great things about transactional work, like you were talking about, you don't necessarily see the benefits immediately, the same way you see if you have a litigation or an immigration case. When the person gets their green card, it's an amazing feeling. When you get a protective order for a woman and her child or a man and his child, that's an amazing feeling. With transactional work, when you're helping these organizations, there's a ripple effect because these organizations help hundreds, thousands of people. You may not get to see it, but the impact is extraordinary.
- Caroline Heller: [20:54](#) That's why I love talking to our transactional lawyers about their work, because their work affects so many people in helping their organizations they help.
- LaQuenta Rudiso...: [21:03](#) Absolutely. Absolutely.
- Caroline Heller: [21:05](#) One thing I'd love also for you to share with us is a little bit about what you think the greatest legal needs are in Chicago right now for the low income individuals who live in the different neighborhoods. I know it's difficult to generalize, but different communities need different things. I think it'd be really great for especially our Chicago audience to hear what you think are the greatest legal needs now. Maybe there are ways that people can help.



- LaQuenta Rudiso...: [21:35](#) Just going back to what we were talking about before, it's what you think, right? In an urban city, right? People need access to good healthcare. People need access to transportation, affordable housing, things like that. But what I really honestly believe is that people need access to capital. And it's not just free government handouts. It's not a couple of vouchers to go live in an apartment or something like that. It's access to the finances that will empower or help John who's living in a small apartment and just wants to start his bike shop.
- LaQuenta Rudiso...: [22:21](#) All he needs is a few thousand dollars to buy the equipment so that he can repair bikes and start going. That's what we need on the South Side of Chicago, because folks know that the city is very segregated. Growing up on the South Side, I don't know what folks on the North Side need. I don't know what folks on the West Side need. I live in the suburbs and I don't know what the people in the suburbs need. But I do know that the people on the South Side, they need access to capital because there's a lot of dreamers out there. There are a lot of entrepreneurs out there.
- LaQuenta Rudiso...: [22:56](#) There are a lot of people who are just geniuses out there that wants to provide a service or want to provide a product to somebody and just can't get the idea off the ground because they don't have access to capital. A lot of organizations now, private equity comp firms and private companies, are dedicating some of their resources to minority owned businesses and things like that. But until we see a real effort to allow folks to have access to capital... And I know people don't usually think about things like that from a pro bono perspective, but I feel like it can be done.
- LaQuenta Rudiso...: [23:38](#) I feel like if, like I said, John wants to own a bike shop and he can not afford legal services, one day we will be able to provide. One day soon, we should all be able to... Us lawyers, transactional lawyers, should be able to come together and provide John free legal services to help negotiate a venture capital deal with an angel investor. I think that's what that looks like. Because once you empower a community in that way, then they start to take care of themselves. They start to build up the neighborhoods, build up the restaurants, build up the housing.
- LaQuenta Rudiso...: [24:16](#) People are excited to go to school and learn STEM and other things that they can do to further promote the neighborhood. I think I'm always going to go back to that. You had your typical, like I said before, needs in an urban setting, but access to capital is really what's missing.

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Caroline Heller: [24:37](#) LaQuenta, thank you so much for sitting for our interview today and for sharing your great pro bono work. I appreciate associates like you, and we have so many who do so much great work, and I hope to give more of them airtime. Thank you so much.

LaQuenta Rudiso...: [24:53](#) I appreciate it. Very grateful and very honored. Thank you.

Caroline Heller: [25:00](#) Thanks for listening to this episode of Good in Practice. I'm your host, Caroline Heller, Chair of Greenberg Traurig's Global Pro Bono program and litigation chairholder in the New York office. My guest today was LaQuenta Rudison, who is an associate in the Chicago office in the corporate department. I hope you tune in in two weeks for another pro bono story.