Speaker 1 (00:00):

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Caroline Heller (00:19):

Welcome to Greenberg Traurig's pro bono podcast, Good in Practice. I'm your host, Caroline Heller, and I'm a litigation shareholder in the New York office and chair of Greenberg Traurig's global pro bono program. As any lawyer knows, any success you have in a case is a true team effort, and I'm not just talking about the other shareholders or of counsel or associates who are working on the case. No lawyer can be successful in a case unless they also have the help from paralegals, legal support specialists, office staff, office service staff, court runners. You name it, all of the non-lawyers at law firms are critical to the success of any matter, so in celebration of Pro Bono Week, I wanted to do an episode highlighting the incredible work of some of our staff members who have supported our pro bono cases.

(01:10):

We're calling this podcast episode Not All Heroes Have JDs, and I wish I could remember who to give credit to for the name. It was one of the pro bono coordinators who came up with this when we were talking about how we can't do our work without non-attorneys. I've noticed personally in some of my cases where I've used non-attorneys to help interpret with clients who are not primarily English speakers that the staff I've used on my cases develop a real rapport and relationship with the clients that allows us to get information from the clients about their cases that we might not have been able to otherwise. I have personally seen what staff can add to a case. For example, I've had some staff members translate for clients whose primary language is not English, and when I use the same person over and over, they develop a rapport with the client, and there have been some times when the client has shared information with the support staff who's doing the translation that they didn't share with me. And so I've recognized the importance of having those relationships and have seen improve in how the cases are handled, how they're managed, and the type of information we can get from the client.

(02:24):

So I'd like to introduce the staff members that are going to be speaking with us today. First is Efrain Camacho. He is a paralegal in our Philadelphia office. Efrain has been at Greenberg Traurig for over 15 years and he started off his career as a court runner in the New York office. Over the years, Efrain has acted as a Spanish interpreter for probably over 50 clients, and I'm sure I'm under-counting.

(02:50):

Some of the cases Efrain has worked on have been immigration matters, and others have been matters involving children with special needs who need help with appropriate school placements and educational settings. He helps with everything from translating during meetings to accompanying clients to court or on school visits and reviewing legal documents with them.

(03:12):

Next, we have Stacy LeVine, who is a legal support specialist in the New York office. She has been at Greenberg Traurig for over 15 years as well. One of her initial assignments was to help me out, and I noticed early on that when I sent her briefs to proof in my pro bono cases, she would occasionally make a suggestion about wording and language that improved the persuasiveness of the argument. I started encouraging her to do that more, and over the past decade, her work has enhanced the storytelling of a lot of my pro bono matters.

(03:45):

And finally, I would like to introduce Adela Gonzalez and Lety Guerrero, who are legal support specialists in the Houston office. Adela has been at Greenberg Traurig for over 15 years, and Lety has been here for over 22 years. For some background, the Houston office has taken on a lot of cases representing refugee children in immigration proceedings that allow these children to apply for green cards if they meet certain requirements. Adela and Lety have acted as Spanish interpreters for countless numbers of these children over the years. They've spent hours communicating with clients, translating documents, coordinating logistics, gathering information needed for the filings, and helping prepare the clients for interviews in court proceedings. I thought a good place to start would be for a couple of you to talk about what got you involved in pro bono. So Adela, can you tell us a little bit about how you got involved with the pro bono program?

Adela Gonzalez (04:43):

I actually started working with Jennifer Thompson, who is a chair to the pro bono program here in the Houston office. When I joined GT, I was an intern, and so I was assigned to assist across the office and just experience what it was like to be in a corporate office job. Now with that being said, later, I got assigned to work with Jennifer Thompson who is litigation but she was handling pro bono cases, and I noticed she had a client come into the office with her child, and there was a third person, a staff member here in the office who was assisting with translation. And I overheard it on my way out for the day, and later on, because I worked so closely with Jennifer, I was able to ask her and I just knocked on her door and I said, "Hey, I noticed somebody in your office. Do you need assistance with translating?" And she's like, "Yes." She explained the whole experience.

(05:39):

When I knocked on her door, I asked the question, "Is this something that I could help with? I would love to help." I was a very, very hungry 18-year-old at the time. I was very appreciative she gave me the opportunity to assist, and honestly, it was the most rewarding thing joining her with this experience. She allowed me to work with her for many, many years, and that's how my pro bono experience started, and I couldn't be more grateful.

Caroline Heller (06:07):

Thanks, Adela. Lety, could you tell us a little bit about how you got involved with the pro bono program?

Lety Guerrero (06:12):

First of all, I actually started off by being a backup for Adela, who is also in the Houston office here. She needed help translating when she was out of the office or just tied up with something else, and so I started just here and there being her backup, and then she left the firm for a few months and that's when I took over basically, and then I was the go-to person for translations of documents and translating phone calls and just helping the attorney with whatever I could.

Caroline Heller (06:42):

And Efrain, how did you get involved in the pro bono program?

Efrain Camacho (06:46):

I was a runner. They needed somebody to translate, and I got to say, at that moment, it didn't cross my mind I'm going to assist an attorney. So my managing employer said, "Efrain, I understand you speak

Spanish." I said, "Yeah." And I remember she told me, "Can you assist?" I said, "Yeah, sure." And I went and ever since then, I started translating for a client. I don't remember right now which one, but there's so many. I started assisting and ever since then, they started needing more translators and Spanish speakers. I said, "All right, I'll go. I'll do it," and at the same time, I was doing my work as a runner, between the runner and translating. So my staff, my team was supportive and they said, "You know what? Do what you got to do, man. That's a good thing you're doing. That's a good deed." And ever since then, I just started doing it more and more. Before you know it, it's been 17 years.

Caroline Heller (07:34):

Yeah. I feel like I might have been that attorney that asked for help.

Efrain Camacho (07:38):

[inaudible 00:07:39].

Caroline Heller (07:39):

It was either me or potentially Jennifer Smith or Bill Silverman, but it sounds like much like Adela's story, it was a matter of just realizing you might be needed and wanting to help. Stacy, can you tell us a little bit about your educational background and what you bring from that to the pro bono work?

Stacy LeVine (07:56):

So I have a BFA in drama and an MFA in nonfiction and dramatic writing, and so what I bring to the editing is not only I have an eye for typos and what have you, but I like to think I have a good sense of the heart of a matter, the humanity of a matter. And I also think that these pleadings should be not entertaining is the wrong word, but a good read for all those people who have to read them. And so it's been amazing to be able to take otherwise rather dry legal language and bring the pathos, particularly when it comes to the juvenile re-sentencing cases, the NYC DOE cases and the refugees.

Caroline Heller (08:48):

And in particular, I remember that there's one case that I had. I was representing a juvenile lifer. He had a chance to have a new sentence and possibly get a reduction from life in prison to a term of years that would make him eligible for parole.

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Caroline Heller (09:03):

... to a term of years that would make him eligible for parole. And we were drafting, with a mitigation specialist, I had drafted an entire mitigation brief, and I remember handing it to you and saying, "Is this persuasive? If not, help me make it persuasive." And I was wondering, we never really talked too much about that experience. We talk about the client all the time who was wonderful, but tell me about what that experience was like for you.

Stacy (09:27):

It was, I mean, the word that comes to mind is moving. I was so moved by this particular client's story, but it was also a very complicated story that involved a lot of external testimony and people who had written in and spoken for him. And it became sort of a puzzle to put it together in such a way, especially

since we're dealing with decades of this man's life, that it was not only readable, but that the reader could feel the same passion for what this man had done with his life behind bars that I feel having all the information before me.

Caroline Heller (10:08):

Adela, I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the type of work that you've been doing for Jennifer Thompson and maybe others in the Houston office.

Adela Gonzalez (10:16):

So as pro bono, none of us are experienced in this specific case work. When we are working with Kids in Need of Defense, it's an organization here in Houston and in other cities here in the U.S. that assist with unaccompanied minors coming into the U.S. And when we receive a case, we work as case managers for these cases and we assist the attorney primarily starting off with the translations and managing all the information that comes between client and attorney, trying to help the client understand that all the terminology that is used is legal terminology, but we have to bring it down to a general Spanish understanding where they understand truly what is happening. They're terrified. They come in, they've never worked with an attorney. This is all just very foreign to them. So assisting the client just on a day-to-day basis on how to get acclimated to feeling comfortable with the attorney, essentially we are that vein that runs between the client and the attorney, making sure the information flows correctly between one another.

Speaker 2 (11:33):

Lety, can you tell us a little bit about a case that may stand out to you or a matter that you worked on that stays with you?

Lety (11:39):

There are many cases that we have going on right now, but one that stood out to me a lot is a young lady now in her mid-20s, but her story goes back to when she was eight years old. She witnessed her father murder her mother. She was a witness to that. She happened right in front of her. After that, mom's gone, dad's in jail. What happens next? She gets sent off to an uncle who basically gives her away to another family. She's there for about three or four years, unfortunately. Oldest son sexually abuses her. She escapes that situation, runs to an older sister who finds her a job as a maid, and she's a live-in maid. And then what happens? Owner of the house sexually abuses her, impregnates her twice, brings her to the U.S. because she's actually a U.S. citizen, brings her to the U.S. and then they're here.

(12:29):

And of course the horrible situation, he's abusive, threatens to end her life and abuses his son and she's pregnant with the second one and then he's still very abusive to her. So what happens? She finally escapes and she finds a way to apply for asylum. And that really stands out to me because I have a daughter and I don't know what I would do as a daughter watching my parents in that situation like that and as a mom, if my daughter were to go through something like that. The very rough life that she has, she's trying to move on from that and it's not always easy.

Speaker 2 (13:07):

No, that is for sure, it's not easy at all. One of the reasons a lot of folks do pro bono work is because they recognize that but for where they were born, who they were born to, anyone can end up in

circumstances that are like that. And so we do this work because we are at a law firm with lots of resources that can help people. It's a good reminder that this is not something that happens to the other people. This can happen to anyone just based upon the randomness of life.

Caroline Heller (13:42):

And Ephraim, can you also tell us a little bit about the type of work that you do? Maybe you have a memorable case that you want to share with us.

Efrain Camacho (13:52):

Yes. When the clients come in, I put myself in their shoes and I don't see political party, I don't see race, I just see a human being and I try to connect with them. And there's a particular one case where it's a few, but one that came to my mind was a gentleman came from South America and it was an asylum case and because of his sexual preference, he was getting attacked in his country. Came here, we helped him out. He felt nice. He felt like, "Somebody's here to help me."

(14:24):

And there was a connection with the attorney, me and him and everybody who was involved and it was an asylum case. Back then they said there was a very hard cases to win. And I remember clearly the attorney was like a human being with a guy, with a gentleman. We hugged, we said, "You know what? Everything's going to be fine." And sure enough, he got the case, he won. And it was a hard case. The gentleman said, "If it wasn't for us and the connection and the trust, none of this would happen." And I will never forget that case, but that's one of so many.

Caroline Heller (14:54):

Yeah. I mean, I'm going to mention one case that you helped me on. We had taken over a matter. It was a Violence Against Women Act petition for a woman whose spouse who was a United States citizen had abused her. And there had been a request for additional evidence from DHS. So we were talking to her a little bit more about what had happened to her. And I don't know if I left the room or if maybe she called you later, but I do remember that you came to me later and said she shared more with me after we completed the interview. She was really nervous. And so I wanted to share with you what she said. And what you shared with me helped fill in some gaps in the information that we had. And I remember, and I was a younger associate at the time, I remember it was the first time that I sort of realized how important that connection is.

(15:43):

And so now when I ask folks to help translate, I really give them a lot of leeway in the conversations they're having with the client to develop that relationship and rapport. That's one that stood out to me.

Efrain Camacho (15:55):

Like you said, it's a beautiful thing to help somebody, the human side. And you never in 1 million years though that folks will open up to me. And I think there's a connection there, translating, trust. It helped me grow too.

Caroline Heller (16:10):

Now I want to talk a little bit about how heavy some of these cases are and how some of you think about this. So Stacy, you have read so many briefs for me in many cases. You mentioned the ones

involved in the New York City Department of Education where we're representing the parents of students with disabilities, and I've done a lot of those, so you've read a lot of those, criminal justice ones. And I don't know if any of them stand out to you or what it feels like, even though you're not liaising with the clients, you're reading these stories and how that can affect you or if it does affect you. So I didn't know if there was something you might want to share about that aspect of the work.

Stacy (16:54):

Yeah, it very much does affect me. Some of these cases are absolutely heart- wrenching. There's a particular one I remember that involved a student in a wheelchair who lived in a walk-up and the DOE was responsible for making sure that somebody carried him down the stairs and then at the beginning of the day and back up the stairs at the end of the day, which is incredible on its own, but it wasn't happening. They weren't showing up. And for some reason, that one really, really upset me deeply. Also, some of the unaccompanied minors and the refugees, some of their stories are just harrowing and I'm affected by all of them, but in particular, I'm affected emotionally by the children, by things we do on behalf of children, which is a lot of what we do, and that means a lot to me.

Caroline Heller (17:46):

Yeah. Thank you for sharing that. That case was extremely gut-wrenching. I think the judge called the matter Kafkaesque nightmare. Adela, do you want to share a little bit about how it feels to work with some of the clients, whether it takes an emotional toll as well?

Adela Gonzalez (18:01):

A lot of these children come into the U.S.-

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Caroline Heller (18:03):

Emotional toll as well.

Adela Gonzalez (18:03):

A lot of these children come into the US as unaccompanied minors. With that being said, they're reunited with someone here in the US. They've had to travel for several days and several miles by themselves as minors. And it's just something that I just can't fathom to even fully understand.

(18:21):

And when we meet with these clients, it's such heart-wrenching to hear such small children having to endure some of the things that they endured, whether it was in their home country, or even during their traveling for them to be able to reach safety with their parent here in the US. And it's just something that we cannot conversate with a parent because the parent didn't live that.

(18:46):

So even though they are essentially the adult in the room, we have to hear this firsthand from children. Such an emotional toll for anybody to be able to imagine some of the stories that I've been able to hear from some of the children, even down to the smallest of necessities that were not being met in their home country. It's just something that children should never have to experience.

Caroline Heller (19:13):

Yeah. Those stories are extremely difficult. Lety, can you tell us a little bit about, and I think you spoke to this when you were telling us about your case, the emotional impact of doing pro bono work. And does that discourage you from doing it? Does it motivate you? Can you talk a little bit about that?

Lety (19:32):

It's very rewarding to be able to help people. It's a way to give back to the community obviously. But for me personally, it's rewarding to know that I'm doing something for somebody who's in a bad situation, that I'm helping them to hopefully find a better path in life.

(19:49):

Does it take an emotional toll? Yes. Because again, I'm a mother, so I picture my daughter going through something like this, even myself, what if I would've gone through something like that? And it's hard not to get emotionally involved, but I word it as a nurse patient situation. You're kind of the nurse and they're kind of the patient. And you have to show empathy. You have to show them that they can trust you because they have to tell you their story, and they're not going to tell you their story if they don't trust you.

(20:19):

In order to gain their trust, you have to just be sympathetic and understanding, let them tell you their story. The more detail they give, the better because then we can help them more. It's emotionally draining sometimes, but at the same time, very rewarding knowing that I'm doing something to help this person.

Caroline Heller (20:36):

That trust component that Lety spoke about is so important in a lot of our cases, and especially when there's a language barrier between the attorney and the client, building that trust can be very difficult. Lety, I was wondering if you could speak a little bit about how did you develop a sense of how to build that trust with the clients? Did you think that it was a little bit of a learning curve, or was it something that you did intuitively? I'm curious about how you approached that relationship.

Lety (21:09):

I approached it in the sense I pictured myself speaking to a family member, a cousin, or a good friend that was going through it. And so kind of encouraging them to, "Hey, I'm here for you. I need a little more detail so that we can help you." Of course, a lot of them start crying. So you go and you grab a box of Kleenex, "Here you go. Don't worry about it. Here's some water. Take a sip."

(21:31):

Let them know that it's okay for them to break down because they're going to break down, and a lot of them are ashamed of what happened to them. A lot of them are embarrassed. And you have to show them that you understand how they feel, and that it's okay to feel that way. And once they know that it's okay to cry while they're talking to you, that it's okay for them to feel what they're feeling, that little wall comes down a little bit where they start, okay, I can talk to this person. I can tell them exactly what happened. And that's how I go about it.

Caroline Heller (22:03):

I know that some attorneys who I've spoken to about pro bono work, they get nervous about taking a pro bono case because they are worried about the emotional toll that it will take on them. So Adela, can you tell us why you keep volunteering to help translate for these kinds of cases? What's your motivation in doing the work even though the work is sometimes painful?

Adela Gonzalez (22:24):

I'm a first generation American, just as... a major part of my siblings. But every time I think back, I just think about this is the life that my mom lived in El Salvador. This is my in-laws, traveled from Mexico. And it's just something I think back, and I'm like, how close is this to their story?

(22:46):

And when my mother came over 30 years ago now, things were so different at that point of time. But we're now in 2026 and some of these experiences are still happening. As technology has advanced here in the US, some of these smaller towns and in these other countries, they're still dealing with the same issues. The resources are just not there.

(23:10):

So my motivation is just looking back, and as a mother of three, my time is a little slim to be able to set time apart and volunteer as much as I can. But this is me giving back to the community, and specifically my community, the Hispanic community. It's very rewarding to me to see how these cases start as an intake. And some of these cases will go on for about 10 years. And to be able to see how much has transpired in that child's life while being in the US and the success that they've been able to reach, that's the biggest reward, and it's all for the child at the end of the day.

Caroline Heller (23:50):

Yeah, it is really quite extraordinary with some of these refugee cases where they do come in, they're minors, but you are in constant communication with them throughout high school, and then they either go into college or they get jobs. And it is really incredible to see the wonderful human beings that they turn into from these really startlingly resilient children that they came here as.

(24:13):

Stacy, I want to ask you the same question. And by the way, I completely recognize that if I ask you to prove something, you can't really say no. But you not only do what is asked of you as a legal support specialist with the attorneys you work with, but when at least it comes to the work that you've helped me on, you put your heart and soul into it, and every brief is important. But if I say to you that this particular case, we really need to grab the attention of the reader because of what's at stake for the child or whomever we're representing, you throw yourself into it. And so I'm curious what gives you that motivation and drive to really put 2000% into making the person's story as persuasive as possible.

Stacy (25:01):

I am madly in love with language and what language is capable of. Quincy Jones has said about scoring a film that we tell you, we, the ones composing the music, tell you how to feel. And obviously a writer has that same power. And to be able to do some little bit of good in the world with my specialty, which happens to be language, particularly English, it's a personal joy, but it's also a grave responsibility and one that I take very seriously and that means a lot to me, not only because of the cases themselves which move me, but in particular the DOE cases. And even though I've been working on those for 15 years now, I now have a seven-year-old nephew who is in the DOE IEP system. And every child is my

nephew when it comes to these briefs, every one of them. And I just want everyone to have a wonderful education.

Caroline Heller (26:11):

Well, that is why we do those cases. And I remember when you helped me with one of those matters when we were really making the brief the best that it could be, I did mention to the parent that I had this wonderful person helping me to really convey the story of her child. And she was so grateful to know that there just wasn't one person at the law firm helping her. There were multiple people, and it really made her feel taken care of and she really appreciated that. And Efraín, how about you? Is there a reason that you continue to do this work and volunteer every time you know somebody needs help with translations?

Efraín (26:52):

I mean, growing up in the Bronx, raised, you see a lot of stuff. I've been through 9/11, COVID, and growing up, it wasn't easy. So seeing these kids, what they going through-

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Efrain (27:03):

Growing up, it wasn't easy. So seeing these kids, what they going through, and for me to help them come here and we helped them and fulfill their dreams, that's what it's all about. And it motivates me to keep helping, because I see in their eyes myself growing up. So it just keeps you going and they're tough. They're tough coming here.

Speaker 3 (27:23):

Now you're going to make me cry.

Efrain (27:25):

[inaudible 00:27:25] kids. They don't know. They don't know what they're getting into. They just know that they have a chance with a voice. And I hear it from the clients and they're telling me... I didn't see it that way, but... I cry now, but when I'm [inaudible 00:27:38], I got to keep a strong posture, be serious because if I cry, it makes it worse for them and it's hard for you. But I'm not complaining. I love it. And I want to say something else that what motivates me a lot also. I think I mentioned to Allen that I met one day at a Christmas party, Mr. Alvarez, and he told me what his struggles, what he had to do to come his family. And I said, "Damn baby, you did it. Helping people." And he's helping people now. And look, he told me, "It's good what you're doing. Keep going. I'm very proud of you."

(28:11):

And I'm like... I didn't know who this guy was. He looks much older now and with all respect, I didn't know who he was. And one of my coworkers said, "Do you know who you spoke?" I said, "No, it's Mr. Alvarez." And he opened up to me. And when I told him what I do, he was very happy. And I think that's what it means about helping. This is the man, this is the co-founder of the firm that motivated more, kept me saying, "I want to keep doing this."

Speaker 3 (28:34):

Yeah, Cesar's story is incredible. And Efrain is talking about Cesar Alvarez, who is a senior chairman of Greenberg Traurig. But his story of how he came here from Cuba with his family, his two brothers is really extraordinary, and he's spoken about it a little bit. So I really encourage anyone listening to this to Google his name and hear his words. He and the others who started the law firm all had stories of how they came from communities that were underserved or marginalized. And our origin story as a firm is really about giving back to communities. Before we wrap this up, I'm curious, is there anything that you would like the attorneys or staff who are listening to this podcast, anything you'd like them to know about the pro bono program or your experiences? So Adela, why don't we start with you?

Adela (29:27):

What I would say is to find what you're most interested in. And also everybody's pro bono case is not the same workload. There's limited scope pro bono cases. So even if you don't see yourself having a lot of time to do a pro bono case, it's not a long-term commitment, but it's your way to give back to the community and any scope. The pro bono clients on the other side would be extremely grateful.

Speaker 3 (29:52):

Lety, is there anything that you would like the listeners of this podcast to know about the program or the work that you've been doing?

Lety (29:59):

For me, like I said, it's very rewarding. So if you feel like you at a point in life where you want to do something to help somebody to feel better and know that you're helping somebody, this is the perfect way to do it. These people need help, not just the language barrier, but obviously they're seeking asylum. They're seeking to be here permanently, and they need all the help they can get. And with language barrier, like you said earlier, it's hard, because they can't really communicate with the attorney except for through you. So if you can help them, why not?

Speaker 3 (30:29):

And Stacy, how about you?

Stacy (30:31):

I really encourage everyone, particularly the litigators, to be involved in pro bono as much as possible. Complex commercial litigation is important, but you can still feel like a grassroots level person giving back. And it can be a very simple case or it can be a very complicated case, like Adela was saying, but I think everyone would be surprised how much they get personally out of this particular work. It's very, very rewarding.

Speaker 3 (31:05):

Thanks, Stacy. And Efrain, is there anything that you would want people to hear?

Efrain (31:09):

Yeah, I invite everybody to get involved, everybody. Coming from Mexican parents myself, we have a thing in Mexico they say, "[foreign language 00:31:16]. For the wellbeing of everybody you help the poor." And it's rewarding. As a human being, you feel good. You take that for your soul, for the rest of your life. You won't regret it.

Speaker 3 (31:29):

Thank you. And that's a wonderful sentiment to end on. I want to personally thank all of you for the great work that you do, and also all of the staff at Greenberg Traurig who supports pro bono cases. There were too many to have on the podcast. You know who you are. We appreciate you. We're grateful for you. We thank you. Our clients thank you. We could not do our work without you. Thank you for listening to this episode of Good in Practice. I appreciate you spending pro bono week with us, listening to the staff members talk about the wonderful work that they do. And please, attorneys, thank your staff members this week, Pro Bono Week, for all of the help they give you on your pro bono cases.

(32:12):

It was a pleasure to have Adela, Lety, Stacy and Efrain on our podcast to talk about the critical support they provide to our pro bono clients. Check back soon for future episodes where we will bring you more stories from Greenberg Traurig Global Pro Bono Program. Thank you for listening.

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