

# Commitment to Community

An Interview with Caroline J. Heller,  
Shareholder, Litigation Practice, New York Office and Chair, Global Pro Bono Program, Greenberg Traurig

**EDITORS' NOTE** *Caroline Heller is a shareholder in the Global Litigation Practice of Greenberg Traurig's New York office and chair of the firm's Global Pro Bono Program. Together with the firm's 40 pro bono coordinators and Greenberg Traurig's pro bono manager, she designs and implements the firm's work to provide pro bono legal services to marginalized and underserved communities in the United States and throughout the world. She also works nationally on complex commercial litigation and business disputes.*



Caroline J. Heller

## Why did you decide to become a lawyer?

For most of my childhood, I wanted to be a veterinarian because I love caring for animals, but when I was about 12, my parents went through a very bitter divorce and my father, with whom I had always been close and loved very much, changed from a kind, loving parent into a person full of rage who seemed driven to punish my mother regardless of the cost. The cost was my mental health and that of my younger sister, because my father took out a lot of his anger on us. We were scared to be with him, but the court compelled us to visit him against our wishes. I wanted my own lawyer to speak on my behalf, but I never got one. Eventually my mom got sole custody, but because of the experience I decided to become a lawyer to protect children in similar situations. Over the years, I learned my passion was to protect the most vulnerable among us in the legal system. I still love animals – our family has two cats, a fish, and a hamster – but I have never questioned that I am doing what I was meant to do.

## What are the common reasons that people are drawn to pro bono or nonprofit work?

When you talk to people about why they do pro bono work, whether it is a nonprofit attorney, such as one of our Equal Justice Works Fellows, or an attorney or staff member at a law firm, everyone has a story about some trauma they have endured in their life or that somebody they love has endured. That's an incredibly important motivator, whether people talk about it or they don't. People who are committed to helping vulnerable populations do it because

they've felt vulnerable at some point in their lives.

## Will you highlight GT's pro bono program?

We have one attorney in every U.S. office and some of our international offices who is the pro bono coordinator for that office and also a lawyer in their own full-time practice. Greenberg Traurig created these roles to help attorneys in each office find regional pro bono opportunities. As we've grown from one office in South Florida more than 50 years ago to a

worldwide, 2,400-attorney firm, those coordinators are critical to helping all of our attorneys engage in pro bono work. And our attorneys can choose to work on matters important to them and their communities; we don't direct them to one or two areas of focus.

## Do the firm's clients want GT to be involved in pro bono work?

Yes, of course. It's an expectation now from clients that the firm is involved in pro bono and community work. Indeed, many of our clients

require their in-house attorneys to engage in pro bono work, so we often find ways to collaborate with our clients on pro bono projects. Supporting our communities in tandem with our clients is one of the most rewarding experiences our attorneys can have. When a client is looking for a law firm, there are a number of factors involved in their decision on who to hire. We have to provide the highest quality legal services, but there are a lot of law firms that can do that and do that well. What makes a law firm stand out is its commitment to diversity and its commitment to pro bono and its community – in addition to providing top quality legal representation.

## What advice do you give to junior attorneys who want to move into leadership positions at the firm?

First, I tell them they need to have a passion for the area in which they are seeking that role. If an associate asks me how they can get into a leadership role with Greenberg Traurig's women's initiative, I want to know if they want to do it because someone told them it was a good career move or it is something they are passionate about. It's important to be true to yourself because there will be times that the role is challenging and passion is a critical driver to meeting and overcoming those challenges. Second, I tell associates to get to know the law firm and its culture – not just your leadership and the other lawyers, but get to know the staff: the paralegals, the clerks, the individuals in office services. Listen when people are speaking, pay attention to how things work, and treat every person with the same respect. That's how you really get to know the firm and develop into a successful leader.

## How do you help associates find their purpose?

Helping an associate determine what drives them requires a great mentor. Formal mentoring programs are critical, and Greenberg Traurig has a fantastic one, but associates should also look for mentors in the groups of attorneys they work with every day. Some of the best relationships develop organically when you find someone who truly sees who you are and helps you discover what drives you, sees the areas in which you need to improve, and cares enough to work on your weaknesses and nurture your strengths. I would not be the lawyer I am today had it not been for these significant relationships, and I am eternally grateful to those mentors. ●

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