

NativeBusiness

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Lacey Horn

Lacey Horn always knew that she would be back.

"I always knew I would work for my Tribe," Horn said in an interview with Native Business Magazine. "I never knew in what capacity or in what form it would take. But I just knew I would come back and help my people in my own way."

By Andrew Ricci

PHOTOS BY: RYAN RED CORN



**COMING HOME &
MAKING AN IMPACT**

As the treasurer of the Cherokee Nation, she is doing just that. Horn grew up in Oklahoma Indian Territory. Her mother is a nurse practitioner and her father worked with her grandmother in the family business, and she credits both of them for being role models who provided a strong blueprint for her life. It was her late Grandma Horn, she says, who inspired her love of accounting and finance when she was only four years old.

Even though she has a bachelor's degree in business administration and a Master of Science in accounting from SMU, she says that "Grandma Horn was my first finance and accounting professor and she taught me everything about running a small business and managing finances, so I always say finance is in my blood."

Those early experiences set her on a path that has made her a nationally recognized leader, advisor to the US Treasury on Tribal issues, much sought after board member and speaker, and heavily decorated professional.

While at SMU, Horn spent time interning in the internal audit and tax departments at the Dallas office of Hunt Oil Company, one of the largest privately-held companies in the United States. To this day, she credits Hunt Oil for supporting her goals and endeavors, and for providing her with opportunities to grow and develop.

"SMU is a thoroughbred institution for business and finance, so foundationally, I had a solid education," she said. "When I started at Hunt, they let me write my own ticket, so I worked in their internal audit and tax departments."

When it came time for her to graduate, she decided that she wanted to go into public accounting as a profession. After hearing that the best opportunities for that field were in Washington, DC, Chicago, or San Francisco, she moved to the Windy City to take a job with KPMG, one of the largest professional services companies in the world and one of the "Big Four" accounting firms.

Even though KPMG employs 189,000 professionals, Horn quickly gained recognition among her peers and colleagues. She was consistently rated as a "Superior Performer" in the Financial Services division and was selected as the Chicago representative for the KPMG Midwest Audit

Senior Associate Council, one of 14 members representing the Midwest area offices. She was also selected as a 2009 KPMG National Intern Instructor from a nationwide pool of applicants.

"When I went to work for KPMG, it was like getting another college education," she said. "They matched me with a mentor who was exacting and a perfectionist. From an audit perspective, that's what you want, so I was lucky to be able to learn from her."

"I was also lucky to be exposed to big names and well-known clients," she continued. "Everyone I worked with there were stars in their own right, and they taught me more than I could have imagined."

For someone just starting out in their career, she views the KPMG experience as crucial. The tone that was pushed from

Once she moved, she found that the recession had hit Oklahoma just as bad – if not worse – than the rest of the country. And with the Tribe preparing to elect a new Principal Chief, Horn says that she felt like her people needed a change.

This spurred her to get involved with the campaign of Bill John Baker, who was elected in 2011 to serve as the 7th elected chief of the Cherokee Nation. Horn had no idea that he would later tap her to join his administration as the Tribe's treasurer. And she certainly had no idea how far this role would take her beyond her cabinet duties.

"When Chief Baker asked me to be the treasurer, he told me that if I really applied myself, I'd come out of this in eight years as an expert in Indian Country," Horn said. "I was 30 years old and I had no Tribal experience, but I was a quick learn-

"If I can help to pave roads by creating or following best practices, then perhaps other Tribes can either follow that path or emulate it in their own way."

the highest levels of the organization reinforced a culture of integrity and commitment, and Horn says her experience with major public companies led to a high comfort level around numbers – seeing billions of dollars on a company's balance sheet – that prepared her well for her later positions.

Her KPMG experience also provided her with another asset that has come in handy: a strong network of professionals that now extends from Dallas to Chicago and all around the world.

"If I have a problem or need help with an issue or a question, there's a lot of people I can call who can help me," she said. "I know how to phone a friend when I need to."

After four years in Chicago at KPMG, Horn felt a calling to move back to Oklahoma.

"After the financial crash happened, it was just a different vibe," she said. "I was also going through some personal experiences. My sister was having a baby and my grandmother was 87, so I felt like I wanted to be back home with my family."

er and I was able to rely on the team here. Chief was right, I've learned so much, and together we've really accomplished a lot."

As Treasurer, she oversees all of the Cherokee Nation's finances, which is no small feat. The Cherokee Nation is the largest Native American tribe in the United States, operating not only as a government, but also as a nonprofit, a foundation, and a corporation with a footprint in 49 states.

It takes six months of coordinated effort for her team to put forward the overall financial budget for the Tribe, and she is also responsible for overseeing various internal and external audits. Payroll and accounts receivable, warehousing and receiving, and purchasing and contracting are all also under her purview.

One of her first steps in the role was to bring the audit experience that she gained at KPMG to examine the Cherokee Nation's budget, looking for opportunities to increase revenues, decrease expenses, and work with the federal government to secure additional funding. As a result of these efforts, the Cherokee Nation's bud-

get has increased from roughly \$600 million on her first day to \$887 million that was recently approved for fiscal year 2019.

"I looked at employee fringe and found opportunities to save on costs, without sacrificing benefits," Horn said. "We found a lot of other ways to save money, and we also organized to better compete for federal grants. This enabled us to free up our tribal money to go directly into needed services for the Cherokee people."

"We also increased our dividend to create a Sovereign Wealth Fund," she said.

While in office, she has helped upgrade the tribe's bond rating, promoted financial disclosure and transparency, and received numerous "Excellence in Financial Reporting" awards from the Government Finance Officers Association.

Looking at the numbers, it's clear that Horn has made progress toward her goal of helping her people. The recently-approved budget includes an \$11.6 million total increase for the Nation's 10 health centers, which is the result of improved third party billing processes.

The health center projects, in particular, are accomplishments she is proud to have had a role in making possible. Growing up, she saw firsthand how her mother, a nurse practitioner, had to treat patients without enough resources. And when she delivered her son in 2010, the Tribe's hospital had to send her home before her 48 hour stay, which is the national average and what doctors recommend.

"Being a mom is one of the reasons that I'm so passionate about our new health care facility that will soft open next July," Horn said. "When I had my son, I had to leave the hospital early because they needed the room for other mothers having babies."

This is a story that Horn has told to as many decision-makers as she can, to the Halls of Congress and everywhere in between. It is proof, she says, that the feder-



al government needs to meet its trust and treaty obligations.

Horn's experiences and record have made her a much-sought after asset and advisor. She currently serves as a member of the Native American Rights Fund's Board of Directors, the Governmental Accounting Standards Board's Tribal Government Accounting Working Group, and the Board of the Oklahoma Center for Nonprofits.

In 2015, Horn was selected by Treasury Secretary Jack Lew to be one of seven Native representatives on the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Tribal Advisory Committee (TTAC), a committee that was established to advise the Treasury Secretary on taxation of Native Americans, the training of IRS field agents, and training and technical assistance to Native American financial officers.

"TTAC is so important to Tribal economic development," she said. "Indian

Country has such an enormous economic impact and we do all of this with our hands tied behind our backs by an outdated tax code. Tribes have real solutions that would not only benefit our people, but all the people who live in and around our reservations. I take every opportunity possible to communicate this information with the hope of enabling economic development and making our lives better."

One of the keys to Horn's successes – and a mantra she learned from Chief Baker – is to always try to find a reason to say yes instead of looking for an excuse to say no.

"In trying to say yes instead of no, you have an opportunity to make a positive change," she said. "Sometimes, you have to say no though, and when that's the case, say it nicely."

She also says that, especially in politics, it's important to carry out your mission professionally and with integrity.

"In roles like mine, there is a bright light shining on you," Horn said. "I try to make decisions by considering the

return on investment it will have for the Cherokee people. If I can help to pave roads by creating or following best practices, then perhaps other Tribes can either follow that path or emulate it in their own way."

If she can do that, helping her own Tribe as well as blazing a path for others, Horn says her goal of bringing greater prosperity to Indian Country will be met.

With her term ending on August 14, 2019, Horn doesn't know what will come next. She says that if she's asked to stay on, she'd welcome the opportunity to continue serving as the Tribe's Treasurer. But one thing about her future is certain: whether she stays in a Tribal government role or goes back to the private sector, Horn is just getting started.

"One thing that I've learned is that when you set your mission to be the hands and feet of God, doors open for you," she said.