



Conversations w/Tino

Guests	Melanie Chase Heskett
	General Manager
	Indigo Sky Casino
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Tino Magnatta: (Music)

Hello and welcome to another episode of GT Radio. My name is Tino Magnatta. And tonight we have a wonderful woman on the show. Her name is Melanie Chase Heskett, and Melanie is the GM of Indigo Sky Casino. Melanie, welcome to the show.

Melanie Heskett: Thank you, Tino, I appreciate it.

Tino Magnatta: No problem. How are you doing tonight? Everything good? I hear the cold weather is starting to set in a little in Oklahoma, right?

Melanie Heskett: It is. We're pretty chilly here tonight.

Tino Magnatta: Yeah as you said, that time of the year. So tell me a little bit about your background, where you grew up, what your parents were like. Give me a little bit of background on yourself.

Melanie Heskett: Well originally I'm from Oregon. I was born in Oregon. And about the age of seven, my parents had moved back here to help take care of my grandparents. And instead of migrating back that way, we ended up staying. So we moved into a small town about 15 miles west of the casino, where the casino sits now, and I would probably say the population was about a thousand at that time. And I think it's still about a thousand people. It's one of those places where everybody knows everybody. And I think when I graduated high school, I graduated with 32 people in my class. So it's a very small town, and very homey.

Both of my parents, they come from a military background so they were used to moving a lot, and so being able to settle into a small town like that was great for them. My mom actually served in the Women's Army Corps and my dad served in the Marine Corps.

Tino Magnatta: Wow, that's incredible.

Melanie Heskett: Yeah.

Tino Magnatta: Unbelievable. That's good stuff. So what was it like growing up in those areas? Had gaming started when you grew up?

Melanie Heskett: No. There wasn't any gaming on the horizon at that point, basically small towns, maybe one store in the town, a lot of farmland. No real big industry in the towns around here because every one of them was as small as ours or smaller, and so there was a lot of distance between towns and not a lot of houses or businesses.

Tino Magnatta: Got it. It was very rural, right?

Melanie Heskett: Right.

Tino Magnatta: And was there any ... what did people live off of? Did they just live off the land? Is that what the main industry was?

Melanie Heskett: Sure. You know, a lot of the time people lived out of their own gardens. They raised chickens and cattle. I remember going about 10 miles south of our house and buying our milk from a farmer. It didn't come from a grocery store at that point. And so you didn't just run to the store and grab something like you do every night for groceries, you had to either get it out of your garden or process it out of your pen and then freeze it and use it for a later date.

Tino Magnatta: Yeah, it was very organic, right?

Melanie Heskett: Right.

Tino Magnatta: So when did any form ... did gaming start with bingo?

Melanie Heskett: Gaming did start with bingo. I know that the Eastern Shawnee Tribe started back in 1985. And it was just strictly bingo. It was what a lot of people called "Indian bingo" or "Native American bingo." I think that enthralled a lot of non-native people to think that they were coming somewhere special to play bingo. I always got a kick out of that. But it started with bingo. And I think it was probably seven years after we first started that electronic gaming came, and so we had a long run at that before we got into the machine game.

Tino Magnatta: How was it back then with the bingo? Were you working back then in the bingo area, or did that come later?

Melanie Heskett: I didn't start bingo until I was 22. I think at that point it'd been up and running for about four years. And my mom had sat on the Tribal Board and she had mentioned that they were needing somebody to work bingo, especially in the pull tab area. And I at that point hadn't stepped a foot in the hall, so I wasn't sure what pull tabs meant. But I found out really quick that it was a quick way to spend your money. And people loved it. So I started as a pull tab clerk and worked in that position for three or four years. And then one of the coveted spots, a floor clerk came open and I went to the floor and started selling paper out on the bingo floor.

Tino Magnatta: Got it. So you graduated to that. And did you find that ... what did you enjoy about the business?

Melanie Heskett: The same thing I enjoy now, it's the people. You know, you meet so many people and you get to know them on a level that you wouldn't know anybody else. You see them day in and day out. I always joke because I say I see these people more than I do my parents or my children, and it's true. We celebrate with them, they come here for their anniversaries, they come here for their

birthdays, they come here when they've lost somebody, you know. They come here to celebrate life and we get to celebrate with them. So that's my favorite part of this business.

Tino Magnatta: How long did you spend in bingo and what was the next thing that you did after that?

Melanie Heskett: So I spent 22 years in bingo, and I truly thought that's what my life passion was. It afforded me the ability to raise my children as a single mom, and it gave me ... you know, every night when I walked in it was like I was going to go be with my friends. They were people that I seen every night. When you work in that position, you create kind of a loyalty, you want these people to come sit in your section. And so I knew they were coming in every night and we got to visit. And then at the end of the night I would get to tell them goodnight, and go home and get to do it all over again the next day.

So I never thought that I would be leaving that position, but we had lost our bingo manager and the tribe was looking to promote some of the tribal members within the casino and they asked me to become assistant bingo manager. And at that point I had to make a choice. Did I want to continue work in that floor, and let me tell you when you get a little bit older it's a little bit rougher, or move up into a position that would not only help me a little bit and my family, but help my tribe. And so that's what I did.

Tino Magnatta: Got it. So what was that like? What was the next position and how did you find that?

Melanie Heskett: Well, being the assistant bingo manager was an eye opener. I always thought those jobs were so easy, and I found out really quick it's not. It's not easy to manage people, and it's not easy to manage customers. And so when my former GM came to me and asked me to take over a position that had just been newly created for our tribe for casinos, as player development manager, I wasn't sure I wanted to take it, and especially because I didn't think I was equipped for that. But he assured me that being out there and with those people day in and day out, that's what I truly did anyway. Now I was just going to take on a title for that.

And so the transition into that role was natural, it was fun. You're just out there trying to make sure that people are happy. You keep them loyal to your property and loyal to your team, and as I moved up, every position taught me something new, but it was always something I already kind of knew anyway, I just didn't know I knew it.

Tino Magnatta: So what were some of those things that you-

Melanie Heskett: You know ... yeah. So the loyalty piece, you know. These people come to you simply because they're looking for something or they enjoy what you offer

them. And so we already knew that, we just had to figure out ways to continue to capture them and make sure that they kept coming back. And that's kind of tough. It's kind of a tightrope when you're working with people that come in and essentially spend their money with you, because they do get mad. They do get upset, and they want you to be the fixer. So you learn how to be a fixer and you learn how to make them happy, and you learn how to make sure that you create a bad experience into a good one so they do come back.

So all those things we knew, but you have to put ... you know, when you start really putting it to a science or put it to work day in and day out, it's like it kind of clicks with you and say hey, this isn't something new and it isn't hard, it's just something I have to do on a daily basis now, where I didn't before.

Tino Magnatta: Yeah, it's very different than someone having a bad experience, let's say eating a meal. It's very different when you're losing money, right?

Melanie Heskett: Right, right. [crosstalk 00:11:10] We want them all to walk away winners, but they just don't.

Tino Magnatta: I'm sorry, say that again?

Melanie Heskett: I said we'd like for them all to walk away a winner, but that's now how the game rolls. And they don't, and so sometimes it gets a little tough out there.

Tino Magnatta: Yeah. Tell me a little bit about what it was like to be a single mother and the woman in the workplace.

Melanie Heskett: It's really tough, and simply just because you have to find a balancing act. Any job whether it be night or day, weekend or weekday, is hard simply because you have to go to work, you have to get ready for work, you have to get your kids ready for school, you have to make sure they get home from school. Somebody's got to feed them and somebody's got to put them to bed. And if you're a working mother that works nights and weekends, even holidays, those times are a little bit tougher simply because as a single mom you didn't have that person beside you to help you do that.

I was very fortunate. I had my mom and dad that would keep my children on those nights and those weekends. And they would keep them and after I got done with my last shift on the weekend, I would go pick them up and my mom would always cook me dinner. I always looked forward to that on a Sunday evening before we'd go home. So that balancing act gets really tough, and your children do suffer for it. It's just simply, do you do this and make a career for yourself, or do you go to something easy, you know, daytime shifts. They can use day cares. Nighttime around here, there just isn't daycare or that support system for team members.

Tino Magnatta: Got it. And a lot of women that have been guests on our show, they see some sort of adversity. What kind of adversity did you face in your career?

Melanie Heskett: I wouldn't really say I had a lot of adversity. I think there is some type of stigma when I first started that men should have some of these roles and women didn't have such a prominent role in the casino, but I don't think it was pointed towards gender so much as it was the men were just the natural progression in this casino business. That's where they started, that's where most of them came from. Women usually took the lesser roles so they could stay home and help with the children and stuff. So stepping into that career path and stepping into a higher position, some people do kind of look at you like what is she doing here, or how did she get here.

Being a tribal member even made that more difficult because sometimes I wasn't looked at for my ability or my talent, but rather did she get that because she was a tribal member. And the great thing about our tribe is they do promote their tribal members and they do want them to succeed, that's why they built these businesses to employ their people. And so it's not unusual for my tribe or any other tribe to put their people to work, but it's not always met with great reception sometimes.

Tino Magnatta: Got it. Let's talk a little bit about that. What do you mean by that?

Melanie Heskett: So it's difficult when you have a tribal member come in and they may have a day off or they might not adhere to all the rules. Or even if they did, sometimes they don't get a fair shake or get looked at as somebody that earned what they came in here for. They get what that is ... well, they wouldn't be here if they wasn't a tribal member, or they wouldn't have got away with that if they wasn't a tribal member.

Tino Magnatta: Right, right, I see what you're saying. Yeah, it's this kind of like a balancing act, right?

Melanie Heskett: Right.

Tino Magnatta: Tell me a little bit about the evolution of your career from bingo, from the early days. I mean, you spent a lot of time in gaming. You have a lot of experience. What has that curve been like for you because you'd been at it how many years now?

Melanie Heskett: I've been at it for 30 years. It was 30 years in July [crosstalk 00:15:50]

Tino Magnatta: Congratulations, that's a long time.

Melanie Heskett: Thank you. And you know, the great thing about it, it doesn't seem like 30 years. It's been a great career. It's been a great experience for me. When I left bingo and stepped into the player development role, it wasn't long after that that I

was made marketing director. And scary for sure, because now they're relying on you to drive all the traffic through the casino, and so that was tough. And to learn that just by my own wit and Google, Google was my best friend in some cases, and to know that my tribe was dependent on me and my employees were dependent on me to make sure that revenue kept flowing through these doors, it was very scary and very stressful. And there were times that I had a lot of self doubt if whether I could do this and have they picked the right person.

So it wasn't long after that that we lost our general manager and he'd moved on, and me and everybody else in the casino had to make up our minds how we were going to move forward. And we moved forward as a team, not just one person in one particular role. And we had a succession of different GMs and different interim GMs and I think as I grew, my teams grew with me, and I think that's what makes it so successful today.

Tino Magnatta: Great. Who were some of ... not who were some of your mentors, but what did your mentors teach you and how important were they coming up through the ranks?

Melanie Heskett: I will say that one of the GMs that was one of my mentors, he really came in and taught all of us. And when we were still at Bordertown, really what does this business do, what does it look like. We found out really quick what we were doing, although it was great because at the time we wasn't in a very competitive area, we could have done it a whole lot better and made a whole lot more money. And so his mentorship and teaching us how everything should work in a casino was the best experience I could have.

I also had a ... we also employed a marketing consultant, and he's the one that helped me in my role from the transition from Bordertown to Indigo Sky. And I did express my doubt to him whether I was in the right role or if I could take on the pressure of building this business the way it needed to be built. And he did say, "Do you always want to be a marketing director, or do you want to be something different?" And I made up my mind then I wanted to be something different. I wanted to be more. And I'll never forget his words and I'll never forget the reaction I had to him because I thought, he's right. This isn't all I want to settle for.

Tino Magnatta: Yeah, you had the drive.

Melanie Heskett: Right.

Tino Magnatta: What are some of the things that you would say to young women coming up in business?

Melanie Heskett: Be confident, and know what your worth is. I see so many young ladies, myself included, my daughters included, that have the desire to succeed and the know how to succeed, but they always have these self doubts that they're not good

enough or they're never going to be good enough, or they don't look right or they don't have the right stuff. And so always be confident, always make sure that your voice is heard. Don't sit back and just wait for somebody to ask your opinion, but get out there in front and let them know what you think. I think that's very important. If you set back, they're going to pass you by.

And most of all, latch into the people that are going to take you to higher heights, and don't let those people go because they're just as passionate about this as you are, and they're going to take you there.

Tino Magnatta: Tell us some of the differences for women in the work space from when you started to where we are now.

Melanie Heskett: I see a lot more women in leadership roles. And I see that even with children and even with the struggles that they have trying to get them to school and everything every day, they come in here fresh, they're ready to roll, they're ready to make a difference. And they are really ready to make a name for their self, and I like that. I like to see that desire and that passion.

I think when I was coming up, what we did was great. We knew we had to make a living for our family, and we were pretty content to do what we did. But I don't see that anymore. I see a lot more drive and desire to achieve more.

Tino Magnatta: Yeah, the drive is always key, right? And also, a hard work ethic like you said. You probably see the people at the casino more than you see your kids and your family, right?

Melanie Heskett: Right.

Tino Magnatta: Tell me some of the things-

Melanie Heskett: They'll stay here right beside me all night long if I needed them to.

Tino Magnatta: Oh, that's fantastic. What are some of the things that are key to being successful in what you do?

Melanie Heskett: I think that the main thing is put the time in, make sure that you show up, and make sure that when you're here, everybody knows you're here. Don't sit back and just let them take the lead, you be the leader. Make sure that they follow or you walk beside with them, but don't ever just let them take the lead and not show up for them.

Tino Magnatta: Do you think that there is opportunity in our business for young people to thrive the way things are going right now?

Melanie Heskett: Oh, definitely. I think there's so much opportunity out there. I think that the educational series, the trade shows, even your shows, you know, I think that's a

great opportunity for the young people to understand what this business is about and how to get a foothold in it.

Tino Magnatta: And why do you think that is?

Melanie Heskett: I think there's opportunity. And wherever there's opportunity, they have to go out there and grab it. Nobody can make them do it. But as fast as this business has grown especially over the last three or four years and especially with technology, it's hard for anybody to keep up with all of it. And I think the younger people already have some of that. Somebody like me that didn't come from a technological background had a little bit to learn, but they already know it. So now they have to put the pieces together, and I think that opportunity is greater for them than it was anybody else in the past.

Tino Magnatta: Let's talk a little bit about the growth because Oklahoma from when you started, has seen an explosion in gaming being the third largest center for gaming, only behind California and Vegas, which has over 120 casinos. Some people have said it's just too much, and some people say it's thriving still and there's room for everybody. What is your view on what's going on in Oklahoma right now?

Melanie Heskett: I second that it's thriving. I still see these casinos around us and we're in a very competitive area, still having great success. We become entertainment capitals within each other's back yards. All you have to do is go to a casino and you can get live entertainment, you can have a hotel, you can have a spa, you can have great food. You don't have to even game. But it's a great experience for everybody and I think the more we better ourselves, the more people appreciate that. Everybody's looking for great entertainment, and all you have to do is walk through a casino to get that.

Tino Magnatta: So do you think that there's a saturation point? Do you think that Oklahoma's getting to that point?

Melanie Heskett: I would think that that could be true if you were just a locals market, but we see people come from Alaska and Texas and Hawaii. People know about us and know about Oklahoma, and they want to come here. Oklahoma's a very beautiful state. A lot of the larger tribes have created tourism opportunities for not just to go into a casino, but to visit great land sites and places that the tribes have built. And I think everybody's interested in Oklahoma right now.

Tino Magnatta: Right. So you think it's just a lot more than gaming, it's also the state itself and culturally what it has to offer, right?

Melanie Heskett: Right.

Tino Magnatta: When you started climbing the ladder at Indigo Sky, what were some of the challenges or obstacles that you had to overcome?

Melanie Heskett: I think the biggest one I had to overcome was I had a lot to learn, and I had to learn a lot really fast. And I spent a lot of time in these four walls and late nights, seven days a week. I didn't spend a lot of time with my mom or my dad or my kids. My son at the time was still in school, and so there were many nights that he went to bed and I never seen him. I would try to hang around in the morning to maybe take him to school or at least say hi to me before I had to take off. And we had a good safe plan. We lived by the school and he knew how to get there and back without a lot of guidance, and that in itself is a challenge.

The other challenge I'd say was again self doubt because I wasn't sure that I was doing things right. I didn't have lot of education as far as gaming went, and I didn't have at that time a lot of mentors or somebody to guide me. So it was kind of sticking your foot out there and hoping you didn't fall over the ledge kind of thing, but I wasn't going to quit and I wasn't going to let this defeat me because I knew that at the end of the day, there were people down on that floor that needed their jobs, and there was a tribe, my tribe sitting out there that had social programs that needed to be funded. And so I just never gave up.

Tino Magnatta: Yeah, back to the drive again. Yeah, it's really important. Now during the expansion, because you guys built the hotel and everything, you were really at the helm of that, you and your team. That was all new for you, right, when you got into that, correct?

Melanie Heskett: That was correct. And that was an experience.

Tino Magnatta: Tell us a little bit about that, because I was down there. I remember when you guys were starting that I was down there and you guys are like ... tell us a little bit about that experience, because I think that was kind of one of the pivotal points in your career and kind of like a turning point, right? Tell me a little bit about how you made it through that and some of the difficulties and the obstacles and emotionally and all that stuff. Describe that to me a little bit.

Melanie Heskett: So when we started the project, obviously we had a team that had decided that ... you know, we did all the feasibility studies, we knew that it had to happen, we knew that that second tower and that conference center was going to go up, and we started looking around for companies to help us do that. And we found a great one and they had great people. We found a construction company, they did a great job. But we found that there was just this one element missing, and that was the connection from these two companies into the casino. And that's where I kind of was thrust into that role was, how do we get everybody on the same page.

I remember one day we were sitting out there and all the power went out. And I walked out there and I'm like, what the heck just happened. And they said well, we had to turn out the power for, I can't even remember what they said, for some reason, but once we take power down for a second, everything goes down for a long time. So we had machines down for about half of the day. So after that, we made a point to make sure that we had weekly and sometimes bi

weekly meetings to make sure that everybody was prepared for anything that might happen out on that job site and that they didn't ... and that might not have been translated into what would happen inside the casino. So on top of just being newly named assistant general manager and taking over that role, now I was helping lead a construction project.

And so it was challenging. It was fun. I learned a lot. I think if I ever had another role I think I'd want to go into project management. I got to pick out all the décor, all the artwork, all the carpeting. I mean, it was an experience in itself, and I learned a lot. I think if I ever had to do it again, it wouldn't be so stressful because I know exactly how it works now.

Tino Magnatta: Yeah, it's pretty demanding. It's a lot of detail work, isn't it?

Melanie Heskett: It is. It is.

Tino Magnatta: Yeah.

Melanie Heskett: And it's again, a lot of hours and a lot of stress, and I am surprised that I'm not gray haired by now.

Tino Magnatta: But you got through it and you know what, what you said before about the whole thing about the social services and your tribe and all that, I mean, that's a major thing because you are really ... everything that you guys do is fueling the community right? And that's really what drives you in the end, right?

Melanie Heskett: Exactly. There isn't a day that doesn't go by that I don't think about how our tribe's going to continue to prosper, about how our team members are going to continue to feed their children or get to work or what happens to them if they're short a paycheck. I don't ever want that stuff on my shoulders or anybody else's here because everyone's so driven to make this work, that I think about it even when I go to bed at night wondering what would happen if Oklahoma was over saturated and we couldn't make this work, what happens to everybody. So it weighs on me sometimes.

Tino Magnatta: Yeah, of course. I mean, some days you struggle and some days you dominate, right? I mean, that's just the way life is, correct?

Melanie Heskett: Correct.

Tino Magnatta: It just seems to be that way. What are some of the things that you see in the future for the Oklahoma gaming? What do you think, where do you think it's headed?

Melanie Heskett: I think gaming in Oklahoma's just going to get better. I know that there's still casinos being constructed. I know that just recently a casino was just opened up on land that was not put in trust. And I think that's exciting for the state of

Oklahoma and Indian nations because it just kind of opens the door just a little bit wider. I know that Arkansas just passed casinos, but I still feel like the culture here in Oklahoma speaks for itself, and I think that we're going to continue to drive tourism even higher next year or the year after. It's on the top of everybody's mind, and we're going to make it happen.

Tino Magnatta: Yeah, yeah. It's a pretty amazing place, it's got a lot to offer. I was very surprised when I came there, all the cultural things that are going on, it's pretty incredible. What are some of the things that you see the tribe doing in the future? You know, is there more growth on your plate on the horizon, or is it just a matter now of maintaining and building on what you have currently?

Melanie Heskett: We're always looking for the opportunity to grow. The tribe's always looking at new economic ventures and the ability to diversify even from gaming. We look at some of the larger tribes and try to emulate some of the things that they're doing with federal funding and their gaming dollars, and I see a lot of growth for the Eastern Shawnee tribes.

Here at Indigo, we're going to continue to grow. We are making some floor changes and things happening up here right now. We're never going to be content to sit back and just let it idle a little bit. We don't have that luxury, but I don't even think that we have the desire to set back for a minute. And so I see some good things coming to both Indigo Sky and the tribe.

Tino Magnatta: Now you have a very strong team and you're very nurturing when it comes to that. Tell us a little bit about building a team and nurturing the people around you, how important that is.

Melanie Heskett: The people that are with me today and that have been with me in the past and no longer here for whatever reason, I came from the floor and I came from a long ways from the bottom all the way to the top. So I know all the ins and outs and the betweens, and I also know the challenges that each and everybody face as they come through those doors every day.

Some days you're just not on 100%, there are some days that you're way over the top and I need you to calm down. There are some days that we all mesh and everything's groovy and we're making things happen really, really, quick. But I do know that there isn't a day that hasn't gone by and won't go by that if I hadn't had my team with me, I'd never made it. So I need to be able to lead them and nurture them and make sure that they know that I'm here for them no matter what, because I need them to be here for me no matter what.

Tino Magnatta: Yeah. What's your advice to native nations to preserve their future and continue to grow?

Melanie Heskett: I think just continue to look for more economic development. I think that there's so much in these areas in Oklahoma that need to be developed and the

communities need to be nurtured. And I think that we have a responsibility to our neighbors whether they're native or non native, we have a responsibility to give back and put back because they're here for us. They open those doors every morning for our guests and our customers, they make sure that our people are ready and get to work. And so it's our responsibility to make sure that we're growing and we're sharing with them.

Tino Magnatta: What is your advice to the young native generation coming in to not only the business, but to the new communities that have been built. Because what I see is there's a new group of people coming in now, and these are not the elders that had to struggle and lived on reservations with no running water and yada, yada, yada. These are people that have had infrastructure now with money flowing from the casinos. What is your advice to these younger generations coming in now?

Melanie Heskett: My advice would be to learn where you came from, who your elders are, and how we got here. I think it's very important that they understand that there was strife and there was so much struggle for us to be right where we are today. I know that when our tribes were relocated from Ohio, we ended up with 53 people when we landed in this northeast portion of Oklahoma. And to grow from 53 people to 3,800 people and albeit it took a long, long time, that's still not a lot of tribal members. And so we need each and every one of those people whether they be young or old, to know what it takes to preserve their culture and their tribe.

I hope that they never lose sight that it's not about what we can provide to them through businesses or gaming, but it's about what they can give back to their elders and what they can give back to their future children.

Tino Magnatta: Yeah. And I remember you saying that education is the key to that, right?

Melanie Heskett: Right. I think education is so important. I didn't have one, and it's not that I don't regret it because I was able to progress without it, but I still think it gives you an experience out in the world that you usually don't have if you go right into the job force. I also think that education does broaden someone's mind and maybe their view on how things should grow and prosper around here.

Tino Magnatta: Yeah. Education is the key. And most tribes have programs that pay for the education, right?

Melanie Heskett: Most of them do, and our tribe is no exception. We do help pay for the education.

Tino Magnatta: Oh, that's great. Yeah, that's a very good thing to do and it's very common and it makes it easier for young tribal children to get out there and make it once they know that the education is being covered. Hello, are you there? Melanie?

Melanie Heskett: I am here. I am here.

Tino Magnatta: Okay, that's the first time that's happened. It just dropped out. Okay, we're good. So you know what? Let's take some calls. Let's see what we got here.

Melanie Heskett: Great.

Tino Magnatta: Sorry about that. Technical difficulties, and it happens. But that's the first time that's ever happened where it just blanked out on me. That's not good. Let me see who we have here. Okay, let's go to our first caller.

Speaker 3: Hi.

Tino Magnatta: Hello.

Speaker 3: I'm [Norma 00:41:12] and I'm-

Tino Magnatta: Hello, how are you? Yeah, we got ... you're live. How are you tonight?

Speaker 3: Fine.

Tino Magnatta: Good. You got Melanie on here.

Speaker 3: Oh, she's not there yet?

Tino Magnatta: No, no. She's here, she's on. Melanie, are you there?

Speaker 3: Okay.

Melanie Heskett: I'm here. Hi, Momma.

Speaker 3: Hi, hon. I'm Melanie's mom.

Tino Magnatta: And how are you?

Speaker 3: ... and I have a question for her.

Tino Magnatta: Sure.

Speaker 3: Okay. I want to know what is the difference in being a mentor versus being a manager.

Melanie Heskett: Good question. I am very fortunate that I've had the best mentor ever, and that was you. So I think that for me, I feel that both roles are extremely significant in the success for employees. I think they go hand in hand. Mentorship is essentially part of the manager's job though, and if you don't have one, you're not going to really have the other. I always find that the more you ask questions,

the more you teach, and the more or the better you lead, the more respect and the more success you're going to get out of your team members. So while they go hand in hand, there is a little bit of a difference.

Speaker 3: Good.

Tino Magnatta: Mom, do have any other questions?

Speaker 3: No. That was a good answer. I like that.

Tino Magnatta: Good. I have a question for you.

Speaker 3: Sure.

Tino Magnatta: So what was Melanie like when she was a little girl?

Melanie Heskett: Tino, that's not fair.

Speaker 3: She was strong willed.

Tino Magnatta: Yeah?

Melanie Heskett: But I was a pleasure.

Speaker 3: Oh, yeah. Yeah, she was ... yeah, we had good times. But she had a will of her own, that's for sure. When she'd get in trouble, she'd run from her dad and climb trees where he couldn't get her.

Melanie Heskett: Next question, please.

Tino Magnatta: That's what I was looking for. You have a wonderful daughter, she's a fantastic woman. You did a great job.

Speaker 3: Thank you. I think so, too.

Tino Magnatta: Yeah. You have a great evening. Thanks for calling in.

Speaker 3: Okay. Good night.

Tino Magnatta: Okay, bye-bye.

Melanie Heskett: Bye-bye.

Tino Magnatta: Bye-bye. All right. Well, you and I will have to climb some trees together sometime.

Melanie Heskett: I think so. I'm a pro at it.

Tino Magnatta: I know, that's funny. Hello, this is Tino Magnatta. Do you have a question for Melanie?

Jillian: Hi, this is [Jillian 00:44:11].

Tino Magnatta: How are you, Jillian?

Jillian: Great. I just have one question and it is, what advice would you give someone who wants to further their career from an entry level position to one day be in your shoes?

Melanie Heskett: Good question, Jillian. You've heard me talk a little bit about some of the struggles of coming up and coming up through the hard way, from the bottom all the way to the top. And I think there are two key elements here, and those would be time and effort. Because it doesn't take ... it's a long hard road to get all the way up here. And it's not going to come easy, and you have to be prepared to put in the work and the time. And you have to learn gaming and hospitality. It's not about gaming anymore, it's about hospitality too, and you have to learn how to walk side by side with your team members and those managers that you'd be working with.

So yeah, essentially it's going to consume your life for quite some time, but it's well worth the effort. I think that once people come from the bottom all the way to the top, it helps you define who you are and how you want to be as a leader. And I think it also helps you gain respect of those people that you will be leading because they know that you're willing to put in the work.

Jillian: All right.

Tino Magnatta: Yeah, work ethic is the key. Work ethic. Do you have another question for Melanie?

Jillian: No. I just had the one.

Tino Magnatta: Great. Thank you so much for calling in.

Melanie Heskett: Thank you, Jillian.

Jillian: Thank you.

Tino Magnatta: You have a good night. Bye-bye.

Speaker 5: Hey Tino, hey Melanie. How are you guys?

Tino Magnatta: This is Tino Magnatta. Good, good. How are you?

Speaker 5: Good. Sorry I hung up because I thought the phone line had disconnected, so I apologize if you guys tried calling me.

Tino Magnatta: That's okay.

Speaker 5: What was that?

Tino Magnatta: No problem. I don't know. It just went out, it's the first time that's ever happened. It just cut out for some reason, yeah.

Speaker 5: That's interesting. No, I'm from Springfield, Missouri originally. I haven't lived there in probably 25 years, but I'll tell you, I'd been to your property back in the day and looking at pictures of it now, it's unbelievable how it's changed.

Melanie Heskett: It has definitely changed. And I'm always so proud of this property. We keep it nice and fresh. The landscaping is the best I've ever seen, and we have a great grounds crew that makes sure that we keep it up to par.

Speaker 5: Yeah, it's unbelievable if you look at the pictures. I'll have to come visit when I'm back in town at some point. You had such unique upbringing about how you learned starting with bingo and then as the business expanded, hotel, gaming, all the rest of the verticals. How do you find somebody to replace you at some point?

Melanie Heskett: Well, we've talked a lot about mentorship and leadership. And I have been fortunate to look inside or internally at a lot of my team members that have been here for quite some time. They express the desire to move up or have shown the desire to be better. And when those opportunities arise, they make sure they apply and ... because I know that most of these people with the longevity have a great idea of what our culture is, how our guests want to be treated and what our expectations are, those are the perfect people that fill those roles. And at some point, I'm hoping that I've done my job well enough that they can step into my shoes.

Speaker 5: Okay. Well, I was concerned maybe there might not be somebody behind you that has your experience. And I know you're a massive steward for your business, maybe the number one steward of your casino.

Melanie Heskett: Well, thank you. And I do hope that one of these days that grooming will be perfect for somebody in this position or in this casino.

Speaker 5: How tough is it going to be for them to transition to retirement or wherever next is for you and somebody else is in, I'm sure that's going to be a very [inaudible 00:48:48] day, huh?

Melanie Heskett: Yeah. Since I'm very young I don't see that happening soon. But no, I enjoy my job and I've been here 30 years. I was quite young when I started, so I hope that

I still have a few more years here, or somewhere else within the tribe. And I hope that no matter what, I'm always around to serve my tribe and be here for the people that have been great support for me.

Speaker 5: And just to be clear, I wasn't calling you old, I just know you've been there a while and sometimes people like to take an early retirement. I have actually one question. I was just trying to get a little information because I'm interested because I'm from that area originally. But has your tribe looked at possibly into the management like Mohegan Sun and what some of the other tribal casinos are doing?

Melanie Heskett: It has always been the desire of the tribe to manage their own properties, and so third party management hasn't always been something that they've really took a hard look at. We do have quite a few tribal members that are in leadership roles in this casino, so it is their desire to continue to build those people up, that they might be able to become leaders here and continue to serve the tribe in management roles instead of going outside.

Speaker 5: Okay. Sorry, my question was, Mohegan Sun is now managing other casinos across the country and the world. They're building a property in South Korea. And I know your tribe has their head on straight and it seems like they've got a very level headed approach on how they're managing the entertainment. I'm just wondering if that's something your tribe has ever looked at.

Melanie Heskett: They haven't. They haven't yet. I wouldn't say that that would never be on the table, but not at this point.

Speaker 5: Yeah. Well, good. Tino, you asked probably three questions I had on my list, so that's all I have for now.

Tino Magnatta: Oh, that's okay. No problem.

Speaker 5: Melanie, thank you. Tino, thank you.

Tino Magnatta: Thanks for calling in. I really appreciate it.

Speaker 5: Okay.

Tino Magnatta: Thank you.

Speaker 5: Thanks.

Tino Magnatta: Okay, bye-bye.

Melanie Heskett: Bye-bye.

Tino Magnatta: So a caller couldn't call in, but they texted me a question which is an interesting question, and I didn't even know about this so I'm going to ask you. And they're just driving and they couldn't talk on the phone, but they asked, please ask Melanie her thoughts about the compact and the potential direction that may happen January 1. That was the question.

Melanie Heskett: So my thoughts on the compact is pretty much what everybody else's in Indian country is, that the compact auto renews in January. I feel like that's what the compact says. I also feel like the tribes are going to stand together on this and make sure that their voices are heard and that the state understands their position and what they've done for Indian country with gaming. It's not that we just get all this revenue and set on it, we share with the communities, all the rural areas. All the things that the state of Oklahoma cannot provide for our communities, the casinos are doing it and the tribes are doing that with gaming revenue.

So I don't feel like anything's going to happen on January 1. I think that the tribes are preparing if that was to happen, they're being prepared to handle that on their end, but I think that there's a lot that has to happen before we reach January 1.

Tino Magnatta: They just texted me. They said, "Great answer." So there you go.

Melanie Heskett: Thank you. Thank you.

Tino Magnatta: Okay. I'll text them back. Yeah, time for one more. This is Tino Magnatta. Do you have a question for Melanie?

Daniel: Hey, this is Daniel.

Tino Magnatta: Hey Daniel, how are you?

Daniel: Good. How are you? Mel, what advice would you give to let's say a mid level manager, somebody who doesn't see the ability to grow any further with their current casino. What advice would you give them in the short term versus long term?

Melanie Heskett: First of all, I admire anybody that has the desire to grow and take that initiative to move up. I think a lot of people get content in their positions and don't see that potential so, but I have experienced that with some of my leadership teams. And sometimes it's not that we don't want the person or we don't respect their talent, it's just, sometimes there's just no place to go. And so I would make sure that they relay their intent or their desire to move up to their manager and ask that you know, what can I do to be better? What can I do to take that step forward? And ask them to put maybe an action plan in place so I know and I understand if that position was ever to open up, I might be the next in line or the next one considered.

Make sure that if you get that action plan you put it into practice, and ask that maybe an evaluation be done whether you're going to be put in that role or not, ask that your manager evaluate you on a timely manner so you know that if you're excelling or just staying where you were or if there is any potential in the future. But all in all Daniel, if at the end of the day, if it's really your desire to fill that position and there just isn't somewhere else you can move within the casino, sometimes another property might be hiring for that position. So it could be that if that was your desire and you just couldn't see past that one maybe moving on might be the proper decision. But I think that's a decision made by each individual.

But we try really hard to grow our people here and put them in positions that not only serve them, but serve the casino. And I know that a lot of other tribes do that as well. So, good question.

Daniel: That's all, thank you.

Melanie Heskett: Thank you.

Tino Magnatta: Thanks for calling in, Daniel.

Daniel: Yep.

Tino Magnatta: Have a good night. Well Melanie, thanks so much for a great interview, and I really appreciate you coming onto this show, it's been fantastic.

Melanie Heskett: Thanks, Tino. It was my pleasure.

Tino Magnatta: You have a great evening and great success to you and your team, and fantastic job and dedication. It's really an amazing thing to see.

Melanie Heskett: Thank you. Have a great night.

Tino Magnatta: Same to you, good night. Okay, that was fantastic. Monday, Monday, Monday Monday, another incredible woman from Oklahoma, Mia Tahdooahnippah, she is the only female CEO in gaming in Oklahoma state, and the first female CEO of Comanche tribe in the history of the tribe. I have met her, I spent some time with her in Vegas. Very incredible woman, and you're going to enjoy the show. Remember everybody's got a story to tell, you just have to have time to listen. You all have a good night, and we'll see you Monday.

(Music)